The dazzling new film
from PAUL MAZURSKY, to
follow his smash hit success
AN UNMARRIED WOMAN

Willie & Phil

A NOVEL BY JOYCE THOMPSON

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WILLIE AND PHIL

'Phil,' I said, 'you told me this was a story about a triangle. Where's the hypotenuse, where's Jeannette?'

'Before there was Jeannette, there was Willie and Phil,' Phil said. 'They went everywhere together, they were close friends. The best.'

'Enter Jeannette,' Phil said. 'Willie and I were in New York. It was April, the mating season, two hunters on the prowl. Willie got lucky when this dark-haired beauty asked to borrow the entertainments section of *The Times*. Willie likes her smile.'

'I'm looking for a movie,' she says.

'Domestic or foreign?' Willie says. It was his lucky day.

'You pick it,' she says. 'I'm Jeannette and I'm lonely today and I want to go to a movie. What's your name?'

Paul Mazursky directed and wrote the screenplay for the highly acclaimed film, AN UNMARRIED WOMAN:

Erica of the perfect husband, perfect 15-year-old daughter, and perfect body – the perfect, magnificent Erica is thrust into the crisis of her life when her husband calmly informs her he's leaving her for the young girl he's been dating for over a year.
It takes courage, a sense of humour, a little help from her friends – and a passionate love affair – before Erica realizes that being free is worth just about everything.

Willie and Phil

Joyce Thompson

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What is this thing called love?
This funny thing called love . . .
Just who can solve its mystery?
Why should it make a fool of me?

I saw you there one wonderful day
You took my heart and threw it away
That's why I ask the Lord in Heaven above
What is this thing called love?

Phil D'Amico's last two films have done well, very well. The most recent copped three Oscar nominations, and deserved at least one Golden Globe, even though it didn't win a thing. Politics, they tell me, and I have to take 'their' word for it, since I've got no inside sources of my own. I'm a neophyte, an aspirant, in short, a nobody – a young writer with two obscure novels and one good but unproduced screenplay to my credit. The one good thing about being a writer is that at thirty, people still call you young, especially if you're unsuccessful.

So I may be young, but I'm not dumb. I like the pictures D'Amico puts his name on. They're hip but unpretentious, romantic, but also real. Moviegoers aren't dumb, either. At a time when most of the studios are putting big bucks behind the Emetic Extravaganza, the Special Effects Spectacular, and the Perverse Panorama, D'Amico's gentle efforts have found a grateful audience. I'd put my money, if I had any, on him to outlast the barf-bag school of cinema. I respect what the guy seems to be doing.

So you can see why I almost fell off one of the two chairs in my apartment when my agent called to say D'Amico wanted to talk to me. Naturally, I hoped what he wanted to talk about was *The Bee Tree*, my screenplay, but Charlie said no, he didn't think that was it.

'One of the novels, then?' I said. 'Has he seen the novels?'

'No,' Charlie told me. 'Look, kid, I don't know what it's about. Just go and be glad to get out of that dump you live in for the afternoon.'

Charlie was trying to be cool, but I could tell he was excited. Despite his irritating habit of calling me kid, Charlie's only a couple of years older than I am and about as successful an agent as I am a screenwriter. He used to be an educational publisher's rep, peddling textbooks to the southern California campuses, and for some bizarre reason, actually liked living in L.A. so much that when the home office wanted to give him a desk job in Chicago, a promotion, Charlie quit and decided to

risk his savings trying to get into what he likes to call 'talent management'. I'm one fish in Charlie's dubious pool of talent.

He's been in business about a year and hasn't exactly set the town on fire. I know this because our first luncheon-meeting was on him, at Joe Allen's, and the latest, dutch at Taco Bell. Eight months ago, when I first signed on with him, we both had visions of getting our indigestion at the Brown Derby. By now we're both grateful to eat at all.

'Jesus, Charlie, what should I wear?' It was more thinking out loud than an expression of trust in Charlie's wardrobe sense.

'Trust a woman to go straight for the big issues,' Charlie said. 'I don't know. Wear what you always wear. And call me as soon as you leave D'Amico. Immediately, you hear?'

I promised I would. What I always wear is blue jeans. So does almost everybody else in the Big Orange, except that they pay a hundred bucks and more for getting theirs preshrunk and prefaded, with a label that always says something besides Levi's. The day I went to see D'Amico, I picked a pair that had been with me through my last three changes of address and life and lost their dye honestly to time in half a dozen different laundromats.

So much for style. Substance would have to take care of itself.

Because of the bus strike, I had to take a cab to the Beverly Hills address, which turned out to be D'Amico's home, your basic rich man's hacienda, complete with pool and more exotic shrubs in the courtyard than you'd expect to find in your average botanical garden. He opened the door himself, in a T-shirt and a pair of those running shorts with white piping around the legholes. He'd lost his hair, but not his body. Nervous as I was, I noticed he had nice legs and a good tan, which, being one of those olive-skinned Latin types to start with, he probably got in five minutes of smiling at the sun.

'Yeah? What do you want?' he said, not unfriendly, but not exactly as if he'd been expecting me. I had a minute's panic, which I tried to hide. It'd be just like Charlie to get the day wrong. D'Amico probably thought I was selling Tupperware.

'I'm Alex Stephens,' I told him. 'I think we had an appointment today? Now?'

D'Amico laughed, and it seemed to be at me, as if he knew

my underwear had holes in it, or that I'd never seen the inside of a major studio. 'What's funny?' I asked.

'What kind of name is Alex? I expected a guy, that's all.' Then, a flicker of uncertainty, while he looked closely at me. 'You're not . . .'

I laughed. 'It's Alexandra. And no, I'm not a guy.'

With that he swept me into the foyer, cool and dim. 'You can't be too sure, these days,' he said. 'And would you mind taking off your shoes? I've got a two-year-old who likes to eat off the floor.'

I took off my shoes and followed him barefoot through dining-room and kitchen to the back room, where he had an office. 'It's okay that I'm not a guy, I hope.'

'Sure,' he said. 'I'm no chauvinist. I believe women can do anything they set their minds to ' He talked fast, with a kind of New York tough-guy twang. 'Sit down.' There was a desk, piled high with junk, but he took an armchair and left the sofa for me. 'I read your script,' he said. '*The Bumblebees*.'

I may be nobody, but I take pride in my titles. '*The Bee Tree*,' I corrected.

'Yeah. It's good.'

'You want to produce it?'

He shook his head. 'It'd make a fine film, but it'd also be a financial disaster. No star parts.'

So that was why a good script hadn't sold. I guess I am naive.

'You working now?' he asked.

He had nice eyes, serious, in a slightly wolfish face. I didn't want him to know quite how hungry I was. I hedged. 'My agent's talking to them about me co-writing *Airport '85*.' It was more or less true; Charlie *had* talked to them, and they hadn't exactly said no. It was more like we'll call you.

'Guano,' D'Amico said. 'You shouldn't waste your time on junk like that.'

From his point of view, it was true. He could afford to have integrity. 'I wouldn't have to use my real name,' I pointed out.

'I've got a story,' D'Amico said, 'that I need a writer for. After I read *The Bumblebees*, I had a hunch you might be able to handle it.' He looked me in the eye. 'You interested?'

'What's the story?' Be cool, I told myself.

Now his eyes withdrew, and he looked at his own hands, tented in front of his face. I heard a high-pitched yelp; some-

where in the house, D'Amico's two-year-old was practicing his war whoops. 'It's about three people who love each other,' D'Amico said. 'Two guys and a woman. They love each other very much. I guess you could call it a love triangle.' He said it almost shyly, as if he were sharing a big confidence. 'Well?'

'Well,' I said, 'I'm not much into kinky sex.'

D'Amico had a very expressive face, almost plastic, in the good sense of that word. Now he looked genuinely innocent, maybe a little hurt. 'No kinky sex,' he said. 'These guys are straight. They just happen to love each other. And they both love this woman.' From innocent to earnest. 'One thing our culture doesn't understand, it's that men can love each other. Without being gay.'[2]

I nodded. 'And the woman comes between them, destroys their friendship?'

'Wrong,' D'Amico said. 'It doesn't happen like that at all.'[3]

'Tell me more. Tell me about the three people.'[3]

'One guy's Jewish. One guy's Italian. And the girl, Jeannette, is a Southerner.'[2]

I groaned. 'Does she have to be Southern? I never met a Southern woman I couldn't dislike.' As I said it, I realized I'd never known many. I was thinking of one sweet little belle I went to college with, who said things like, 'Ah jus' don't understand what the Nigras want. It's not *mah* fault my great-granddaddy kept six hundred slaves.' That kind of stuff. I figured I couldn't write a type like that without a little venom getting mixed up in my ink.

'She's Southern,' D'Amico said. 'Definitely Southern. She grew up in Kentucky.'[2]

'Okay,' I said. 'She's Southern. It's your picture. So what happens?'[3]

'The triangle forms, and then, gradually, it gets dismantled. It's the coming apart that's hard.'

'How does it end?'

D'Amico shrugged. 'It gets dismantled. The two guys walk off down the street together.'

'Not very satisfying,' I said. 'But we've got lots of time to think of something more dramatic.'[3]

D'Amico gave me a straight-on, take-it-or-leave-it kind of look. 'I know the story,' he said. 'All you've got to do is tell it.'

Any way you cut it, it was bound to be better than *Airport*

'85. 'Right,' I said. 'You're the boss. What're the names of the two guys?'

'Willie and Phil.' D'Amico grinned at me. 'I'm Phil,' he said.

By the time I left that afternoon, I'd got the job. On the way out, I met D'Amico's wife and his son, Tony, a chunky toddler built like a steam engine and hell-bent on disturbing the peace. D'Amico's wife turned out to be Italian, too, pretty, lush, modonnaish. 'You come back to your own kind,' D'Amico told me. He put his arm around his wife's shoulders. 'Next to my mother, Nina makes the best spaghetti sauce in the world,' which was probably true. The rich, piquant smell of garlic simmering in olive oil filtered out of the kitchen and made my stomach growl.

As an employed screenwriter, I figured I had every right to go into the Beverly Hills and use one of their lobby phones to call Charlie. He was jubilant. 'You like Chinese food?' he asked.

'Sure.'

'Then stay right there. I'll come and get you.'

As it turned out, Charlie cooked the Chinese food himself, at his place, and kept cursing about how hard it is to use a wok on an electric stove. I guess he didn't want to squander any of his ten percent by taking me out to a restaurant. His version of fried rice was unconventional; still, it wasn't bad, and there was lots of it. After dinner, I fielded the halfhearted pass that Charlie made more out of courtesy than conviction and said I wanted to go home and catch some sleep. I avoided giving Charlie many details about the project; D'Amico had asked me specifically to be discreet. He also told me I should get myself a better agent.

The last thing Charlie said when he dropped me off at my place was, 'I'm going to call those bastards and tell them you're no longer available to work on *Airport '85*, thanks very much.'

I could tell he was going to enjoy it, and I didn't try to talk him out of it.

D'Amico was waiting for me by the pool when I arrived the following Monday morning with my notebooks and pens and my bottom-of-the-line Sony tape recorder. The maid (yes, there was a maid, not in evidence on my first visit) led me to him. She was Mexican, short, amphora-shaped, disheveled, and took me

to the master with no conversation and less enthusiasm, refusing to acknowledge or return my smile of goodwill. My obligatory liberal guilt was no concern of hers.

It was sunny, of course, and the walls of greenery around the courtyard seemed to have filtered the poisons out of the air and left it clean. The pool shimmered, a cool and lucid aquamarine, and a hand-shaped leaf, floating on the surface, cast a larger, clearer hand-shaped shadow on the sleek blue bottom of the pool. D'Amico was in high gear, eager to begin. He rocked back and forth on a canopied swing. I settled in a lawn chair facing him and set up my tape recorder where I thought it would be unobtrusive.

CASSETTE 1 Phil D'Amico/ Alex Stephens

D'Amico laughed. 'My shrink used to tape all our sessions,' he told me.

'He stopped?'

'I stopped going. I decided to make this film instead.' He paused to light a Lucky Strike. 'This film is going to cost in the neighborhood of seven and a half million bucks to make. At a hundred bucks an hour, I figure I could get shrunk twenty-four hours a day for eight and a half years for the same cash outlay. That proves I'm crazy, right?'

'It depends on which turns out to be the best therapy.'

He shrugged. 'I figure it's about the same. And a shrink never repays your investment. A film might.'

I put on a fake German accent, a bad Freud imitation, and said, 'So tell me, Mr. D'Amico, where did it all begin?'

D'Amico stretched one leg out on the swing and gave himself a push with his other, grounded foot. 'That's easy, doctor,' he said. 'It started at the movies.'

Now I laughed. 'A film within a film?'

'It was *Jules and Jim*. It was my favorite movie that year. Still is. Anyway, it had an endless run at this one theater, and every time I felt depressed, I went to see it.'

'Why were you depressed?' I asked.

'Oh, a woman. But that's not important. She was long gone before the story starts.' He leaned back and settled into his storyteller mode. 'It was 1970. February. You ever been in New York in February?' He gave an only slightly refined rendition of a Bronx cheer. 'The pits. The sky looks like your dirty underwear. And the snow's even worse. The same stuff's been hanging around the gutters since Thanksgiving. You get the picture. Anyway, it was Saturday night, no date, and I went to the

movies by myself. This time, the picture only made me feel worse. Lonelier. Hornier. Then, on the way out, I bumped into this guy, or actually, he bumped into me.'

'Willie?'

'Willie,' D'Amico said. 'Willie Kaufman. He actually apologized for hitting me. No one in New York apologizes, you know? So I took a good look at him, and I liked his face, so I said "excuse me" back. And I asked him how he liked the movie, just to make conversation. I can still remember what he said. He said, "It's a fine film." Pretty weak, huh? So I said, "Fine? It's a mind-blower. This is my fourth time around."

' "I love it," he said. "I love Truffaut." Real distant, you know, like his mother told him never talk to strangers. But I hadn't talked to anybody all day, just hung around my loft and moped, and I needed some human contact. So I kept after him, said this was a movie you should see with a lady.'

'He agreed?'

'Sure. But he also started to walk away. I told him I'd just broken up with this gorgeous thing. Tried to get his sympathy.'

'Did it work?'

'He kept walking. "Aren't you going to ask me why?" I said, and he said no. I told him if he liked Truffaut so much, he ought to have more compassion for his fellowman. That got him.

' "So why did you break up with this gorgeous thing?" he said, and I told him it was because she wanted to get married. Actually, that was a lie. She only wanted to live together, but she was Catholic, so I knew it was a ploy. Anyway, Willie laughed, and we shook hands and introduced ourselves and went to get a beer. And that's how it all started.' D'Amico shifted on the swing. 'Hey, you want a beer?'

When we both had a Heineken in hand, I asked D'Amico to tell me more about Willie.

'What do you want to know?'

'Everything. Anything that can help me build his character.'

'That's weird,' he said. 'To build a Willie.'

'We've also got to build a Phil,' I pointed out.

In the Beverly Hills sunshine, D'Amico shivered, and for a few seconds I thought my great job was going to be over before it started. I did some lobbying. 'Hey, I use my writing to get a handle on my life. Even if my two novels haven't made a lot of money, they've helped me exorcise my ghosts.'

'I don't want to exorcise the past,' D'Amico said. 'Just understand it a little better.'

'Tell me about Willie,' I prompted, and he took the bait.

'Willie,' he said. 'Well, he was a schoolteacher. He taught at Bedford Stuyvesant school. English. It was practically as dangerous as combat duty, that school. They threw stuff at him sometimes, tomatoes, eggs. Half his kids were stoned half the time, and half of them were stoned all the time. None of them was exactly into Shakespeare. A lot of the teachers used to call in sick every other day, but Willie always went and did his best. He's a brave guy, in his way.'

I nodded. 'Was teaching what he really wanted to do?'

'It's what he's doing now,' D'Amico said. 'Then he wanted to be Thelonius Monk. He had this little upright piano in his apartment. He could sit there for hours, improvising.'

'Was he any good?'

D'Amico shrugged. 'Good, but not good enough. Which was lucky for him, I guess. The music business eats guys alive. It's even worse than movies or evangelism.'

'What's Willie look like?' I asked.

D'Amico took a glug of beer and sloshed it around his mouth, like a little kid with Jell-O, while he thought. 'He's got brown hair,' he said. 'Kind of curly.' Long pause. 'Brown eyes.' Then, 'You want to see a picture?'

I nodded energetically.

'You wait right here. Go swimming if you want. It might take me a while to find them.'

He came back triumphant. 'There we are,' he said. 'Willie and Phil. I still had hair.'

He did. Lots of hair. Willie had even more, a Jewish Afro. In the picture, Phil mugged, mouth wide open. Willie, beside him, looked more like an observer, quietly appreciative, a little amazed. He had a nice smile, and if it looked a little tentative, it was certainly nonjudgmental.

'I used a long shutter release,' Phil said. 'That was the first time Willie ever came to my studio. It was just a few days after we met.' He laughed. 'I really wanted to impress him. I showed him all my stuff – cameras, lights, lenses, umbrellas, the works. I had this new four-color enlarger I was madly in love with. I bored the poor guy stiff. I've always been a hardware junkie, but Willie isn't much for machines. They intimidate him. Fin-

ally I put him in front of the camera and asked him what he thought of Plato. To put him at ease.'

'What did Willie say?'

' "A very fine man and a great clutch hitter." I told him to be serious.

' "I really don't know much about Plato," Willie said. "Something to do with shadows on the walls of caves."

'I was shooting away. "Shakespeare," I said.

' "A very fine writer and a terrific head for real estate investments."

'Funny, huh? I told him "Don't talk down to me, Willie."

'And Willie said, "I think you're under the mistaken impression that I'm an intellectual."'

Phil looked up from the photograph. 'I wanted him to be, you know. I always wanted to be an intellectual myself, but I can't spell "existentialist". So the next best thing is an intellectual friend. Nobody in my neighborhood ever talked about shadows on the walls of caves.'

'Was Willie really an intellectual?'

'Sure. Only he claimed he wanted to be a baseball player. He always said the biggest trauma of childhood was when the Dodgers left Brooklyn. Anyway, I told him my predilection had always run more toward Dante, Botticelli, and Michelangelo.'

'Is that true?'

'Sure. We're all famous Italians. Anyway, Willie was knocked out by the kind of women I took pictures of. He was also very horny. What he's probably saying in the picture is, "What are the chances of you calling up a couple of those gorgeous Presbyterian models and us getting laid?" Something like that.'

'Did you?' I asked.

'What? Call them or get laid?'

'Either,' I said.

'Both,' he said.

At that point, Tony the Terrible came chugging into the courtyard, stark naked, and braked just short of his father's knees. Phil grabbed him 'Where's your pants? Where's your momma?' He hefted the kid up on his shoulders and trotted him up and down.

'Horsie!' Tony shrieked. 'Run fast!' He administered some mean kicks to his father's ribs. Phil bucked and whinnied, then

obliged his son with something like a two-legged canter around the swimming pool. They'd had a good workout before Nina appeared to retrieve the boy.

'I had him all ready to go into the tub. The phone rings. When I get back – he's gone.' She plucked Tony off his father's shoulders. 'It was *People* magazine calling. I told them you'd get back to them.'

Phil grunted, while Nina led Tony away, scolding him gently in Italian. Phil watched them go. 'Last week he got three blocks away before she caught him. The Christopher Columbus of Beverly Hills. One of these days, he's going to discover Los Angeles.'

'You speak Italian?' I asked him.

'Only to curse and to pray. My folks spoke it at home a lot, but it embarrassed us kids. It wasn't American. I'm glad the kid does, though. He talks to his grandma and grandpa on the phone. They love it.'

'You're first-generation?'

Phil nodded. 'Willie's second. A German Jew.' He looked fondly at the picture of his younger self, his younger friend. That was half the hit of making it with those long-legged WASP cover girls. Two kids from Brooklyn, and the American Dream. Only it wasn't. It felt good, sure, but it didn't satisfy the soul. With Karen and Elaine, those were the girls, it was strickly fuck and run. That was okay with me, as far as it went, but Willie was overcome with guilt. He thought you had to be in love with somebody to enjoy sex.'

'Not you?'

Phil grinned. 'I'm an Italian Catholic, right? I've got enough guilt for fifteen, twenty people. I also learned young how to manage it. If Karen wasn't going to feel guilty about it, and she didn't, then I wasn't going to waste any anxiety on her. I had enough to worry about. Not becoming a priest, not going to Mass, forgetting my mother's birthday.' He shook his head. 'Poor Willie, though. He actually preferred cold showers to getting laid without love. Some people get the clap. Willie suffered from terminal idealism. He always expected something more than he got. He probably still does.'

'That's great,' I said. 'Fantastic.'

'What's great about it? The poor bastard was in agony half the time.'

'Not that. I just had an idea for the script. Two parallel scenes. Phil in bed with model – nonchalant. Willie in bed with model – remorseful. Great character stuff.'

Phil thought about it. 'Maybe so. But it's got to be tasteful. I'm a family man. I don't make porn films.'

'At the crucial moment, we can cut away to pounding surf.'

'I don't make corn films, either,' D'Amico said.

CASSETTE 2 Phil D'Amico/ Alex Stephens

'It was wonderful, those first weeks,' Phil said. 'Almost like falling in love. Hell, it *was* falling in love. I'm not ashamed to say it. I love Willie. I'd say like a brother, only I don't love my brother so much. We've got nothing to say to each other. You're stuck with your family, but you can *choose* your friends, you know what I mean?'

'Yeah.'

'Don't get the wrong idea. I told you before, both of us are one hundred percent straight. It's just, I'd never really had a friend before. Not like Willie. St. Theresa's is a tough school in a tough neighborhood. I wasn't a lot like the other kids. They used to call me "Three Eyes".'

'You wore a monocle?'

'I wore a camera. My uncle Leo gave me one of those boxy plastic Brownies for a confirmation present, and from then on, I looked at life through a lens. While the other guys were counting the hairs in their armpits and hot-wiring cars, I was taking pictures. It was as bad as a drug habit. I had to work three paper routes just to keep in film. Anyway, my peer group down in Little Italy thought I was pretty weird. Willie was my first real friend.'

'How come you hit it off so well?'

'We had a lot in common, I guess, besides Truffaut. The war – we hated it. Women, the eternal mystery. We couldn't figure them out. But we kept trying. And we tended to laugh a lot, at the same things. Being able to laugh at not being happy is almost as good as being happy. In fact, it may be the same thing. I'm not sure.'

'Me either. You may have something there.'

'And then there were the differences. A friend who's just like

you would bore the crap out of you in about three days. A friend who's different, you can learn from. Willie took me places I'd never been before. Like to a Knicks game.'

'You're not a sports fan?'

'Naw. I don't believe in all this gladiatorial business. But Willie was a fan for all seasons. He loved the Knicks, he loved the Jets, he loved the Rangers. After he got over the Dodgers leaving, he even loved the Yankees. He knew all the players by name, and he'd go berserk in the stands, like it was primal-screen therapy or something. Me, I went for the hot dogs.' Phil grunted. 'Scratch that. I went in spite of the hot dogs. They were soggy and overpriced, but crowds make me nervous, and I eat when I'm nervous, so I ate them. You getting hungry?' he asked.

'Not yet.'

'Okay. So we went to this Knicks game, and I couldn't believe it. Here's my quiet, gentle, intelligent new friend Willie Kaufman going out of his mind, screaming advice and encouragement to the players, just like they could hear him. Like they cared what he thought. "Pass it, Clyde. Pass," he yells. "Great shot, Willis, my man." I could not believe it. On the way out of the stadium, I told him he took this sports stuff too seriously.

' "Phil," he said, "sports is the most serious thing in the world. We each have our team, and what our team does is a matter of life and death. Without sports, there'd be five thousand murders a minute. Oh, yes, I'd say that sports made the world a much safer place.'

'He could do that. Turn schoolteacher on you. It used to piss me off royal when he'd pull that. "Hitler loved sports," I pointed out. "It didn't help his case."

'Willie said, "Germans don't count." '

'Go on,' I urged. 'This is great stuff.'

'That's all,' Phil said. 'We stopped talking sports when this big black dude, ripped out of his mind, wandered up and spare-changed us. I got tough. Told him to get lost or I'd bite his face. The kid was going to get tough back, but Willie reached in his pocket and came up with forty-five cents. He actually gave the clown his spare change.

' "What'd you do that for, man?" I asked him, and Willie said, "Because I love sports."

'Well, at that time I was getting pretty fed up with all this bleeding-heart-liberal shit. I mean, I started out poor myself. If Little Italy isn't a ghetto, I don't know what is. Only there weren't any programs to register Italian voters, or bus little Dagos on magnet schools. So I laid it on Willie. 'I don't have any guilt about poor people. I don't care what color they are. A guy wants to get stoned, let him go out and work for it.'

' "It's pretty hard to find jobs," Willie said.'

Phil laughed. "Since I've gotten rich, I've *developed* guilt about poor people. I've had good luck. I admit it. And there are tax advantages to compassion. Then, I wasn't buying it. I told Willie that was all a pile of turtle shit. He just looked at me like he couldn't believe I was such a monster, and said, "You can't know what it's like to be black."[2] He made me feel about this tall.'

'Willie was a knee-jerk liberal?'

'Willie was the real thing,' Phil said. 'He just naturally had a feeling for the other guy. And being Jewish, he was awfully sensitive about racial stereotypes. You didn't tell Polish jokes around Willie.[3]

'Well,' I said, 'that's a typical liberal affectation, too. If Willie's supposed to be a saint, you better give me some hard evidence to work with.[3]

'Willie's no saint,' Phil said. 'You can be a good man without being a saint. Willie has his faults. Plenty of them. But prejudice just doesn't happen to be one of them.

'Let me tell you a story that Willie told me. You know he taught in Bedford Stuyvesant, right? Well, one day he was supposed to be discussing *Hamlet* with his usual class full of teenage junkies, streetwalkers, and assorted wise-asses, right? And as usual only a fraction of the kids had read their assignment. So Willie asks the others why didn't they. One kid says he works nights. Another kid says he saw the movie with Olivier. Only he calls him Oliver. Other kids say they can't do Hamlet, the TV's broke. A typical day, right? Then Willie asks them why Hamlet procrastinates so much, you know, about killing the stepfather?'

'Claudius. Yeah. I'm familiar with *Hamlet*.[3]

'Well, this one kid gets up, like he wants to talk, and Willie practically faints. The dude is cool with a capital K. He's done nothing all term but sit in the back and smoke Camels and look

bored. His name was Wilson, something like that. So Willie calls on Wilson. Well?

'"The way I see it,"[2] Wilson says, "this cat can't make up his mind because he ain't getting enough."[2]

'The class breaks up, right? But at least they're paying attention. So Willie goes along with it. 'That's a new direction in Shakespearean criticism, Wilson. Would you care to elaborate?'[3]

'And Wilson does. "Sure thing. The man is not getting laid. The man does not drink. The man does not get high. All the man does is worry. Now, you know as well as I do, that's no way to go through life.'[3]

'Willie decides to call his bluff, "You actually read the play, Wilson?" [3]

'He stabs Willie?'[3]

'Hell, no,' Phil said. 'He delivers Hamlet's big soliloquy, the to-be-or-not-to-be one. Not just the first couple of lines, the whole damn thing. With an English accent, no less. The class went bananas. Wilson ended up in front, right by Willie, and they gave him a standing ovation. Willie was blown away.

'"What you're suggesting, Wilson, is that if Hamlet had been sexually satisfied, he would have been able to make decisions?'[3]

'Wilson looked Willie right in the eye and grinned, 'Wouldn't you?' he said.'

I laughed. 'Hooray for Wilson. That's fanatastic. I want to use that.'[3]

'Of course you want to use it. It's a great story. In fact, I already found the perfect kid to play Wilson. Saw him on a late-night *Baretta* rerun. My assistant's tracking him down.'[3]

'Whatever happened to the real Wilson?' I asked.

'Five to ten for armed robbery,'[2] Phil said.

CASSETTE 3 Phil D'Amico/ Alex Stephens

'What did you guys do about the war?' I asked. 'Did either of you get drafted?'

'We both did,' Phil said. 'And we didn't go. I was physically fit. Perfect vision, right? But there was no way I was going to let them get me.'

'It was a hard time,' I said. 'One of my old boyfriends took a power saw and cut off his pinkie.'

'Jesus,' Phil said. 'That's dumb.'

'Not so dumb. He wanted very badly to be a doctor, so he couldn't go to jail, and he couldn't leave the country. He did what he thought he had to do.'

'I hope he didn't want to be a surgeon,' Phil said.

'Nope. A psychiatrist.'

'That figures,' Phil said. 'Although, actually, it was a psychiatrist that got me off the hook. It was my first run-in with a shrink. I got my greetings from L.B.J. back in sixty-six, and had to report to the induction center on such and such a day. The first thing they do is make you take your clothes off and wait around in your underwear, just to humiliate you. It's worse than the junior-high locker room. There are no secrets at the induction center, believe me.'

'How'd you beat it?'

'They give you this psychological exam, to make sure you're sane enough to go kill people. So I went in and told the guy I was dying to serve my country.'

'That sounds crazy, all right.'

'He told me to sit down. I did. On the floor.

' "Why don't you try it again?" he said.

'I got up off the floor. "I don't know what's wrong with me today, sir, but I'll do it. I'd really like to serve my country, sir."

' "Just sit down," the shrink says.

'"Yes, sir." I missed the chair and landed on the floor again. "I just don't know what's wrong with me today, sir."[1]

'"You have this trouble with the latrine?"[2] the shrink says.

'"No, sir."[3]

'"You must have a messy floor at home."[4] He was trying to con me out of it. But I went along with him.

'"Yes, sir. I mean, no. I mean my mother keeps it very clean, sir."[5]

'The man was getting pissed. He kept his voice real steady – I think they practice that at shrink school – but I could tell I was getting to him. "Why don't you try to put your butt in that chair?"[6]

'I hit the ground again.[1]

'Ouch. You were taking quite a beating.[2]

'Worth it,' Phil said. 'What are a few bruises compared to life in the rice paddies? I knew guys who went. They told me about Nam. I didn't need that noise. So anyway, the shrink says, "What do you think the problem is, D'Amico?"

'I turned the chair around and sat on it backwards and gave him that big song and dance about what a big day it was for me, how I'd been waiting years to join the Army and begged my mother to lie about my age and let me go early, I wanted to serve my country so bad.

'He said, "Why don't you try sitting on the chair the regular way?"[1]

'"Yes, sir. No problem, sir,"[2] I said. And boom, down I go again. The shrink tells me I've got a terminal case of P.Y.A. – Protect Your Ass. I'm protecting it so hard I don't even know where it is anymore. I fell down a few more times and he finally let me go. Free.[3]

'He must have known you were faking,' I said.

'That's what Willie said when I told him about it,[3] Phil said. 'He was sure the guy must have known. But I wasn't so sure. Maybe I *thought* I was faking. Maybe I really wasn't . Maybe I knew I couldn't handle it, and the shrink knew it, too. Also, it had to throw the guy that I was Italian.

'"So what?" Willie said.

'"So I wasn't an obvious Jewish intellectual commie red malingerer that he could shove into a pigeonhole. See, to a shrink, an Italian is like an open book. I mean, he's a tough guy, he's a monster, he's a hit man, he's a killer. He's not a trickster.[3]

'Willie laughed. "And all he eats is spaghetti, right?"[2]

'"Right," I said. "Spaghetti is the foundation of the Italian way of life."

'"I like spaghetti,' Willie said, like he was some goodwill committee from the U.N. "My mother, she makes spaghetti and meatballs at least once a week," Willie said.

'What he didn't understand,' Phil said, 'was that his mother made Jewish spaghetti. People shouldn't believe so much in stereotypes.'

'But you said yourself that spaghetti was the lifeblood of the Italian.'

'I know,' Phil said. 'It is. What gets me is that people don't appreciate what's *behind* a stereotype. Willie thought because his mother made spaghetti sauce from scratch, he knew spaghetti. Giraffe droppings. I told Willie about spaghetti.

'"Does your mother make her own tomato sauce?' I asked him. "Does she take a week just to shop for the tomatoes and the oregano? Does she look at them and squeeze them and smell them to make sure they're just right? Does she get up five o'clock Sunday morning, just to get the sauce going – so that it simmers nice and you wake up and the whole house smells of tomato sauce and you go downstairs and you grab a couple of meatballs and she smacks you in the hand because it's not ready yet? So you wait another couple hours and you sit down at the dinner table and comes the big judgment. Grandpa. Grandpa tastes the sauce. And you sit there, and you wait, and you wonder . . . is it great? Is this the best sauce in the history of my mother's sauce? 'Cause if it isn't, it stinks. No, Willie,' I told him, 'Jews don't have spaghetti."'

'Bravo, Phil,' I said. 'That was an ode to spaghetti. Was Willie the English teacher impressed?

'Nope,' Phil said. 'Willie the Jew tried to one-up me. This was the closest thing we had to a fight for years. He came back with the bar mitzvah.

'"Bar mitzvahs keep a Jewish family going forever," Willie said. "Studying, preparing Where to have the affair . . . who to invite . . . who *not* to invite. Do you invite them to the synagogue *and* to the affair, or just one of the above? Who should take pictures of the event, is he a kosher photographer, and on and on and on."

'"We have Christmas," I told him.

'"Christmas is nondenominational," Willie said.

'"Did you have a tree as a child?" I asked him. I had him

there. He started to make some lame excuse, but I said, "No ifs, ands, or buts. Either you had a tree or you didn't.' And Willie grinned at me, conciliatory, you know? Willie hated to fight. He didn't even much like to disagree.

' "So what you're saying," he said, "is that you beat the draft because you had a Christmas tree?"

'Trust an intellectual to make things tough, huh?' Phil laughed. 'I never could quite follow his logic there.'

'How did Willie beat the draft?' I asked. 'Or do you know?'

'Do I know? Of course, I know. Does a man not know how his best friend beat the draft? I don't even hire anybody to work for me if I don't know how he beat the draft. Willie and I were close. No secrets. Willie beat the draft the same way I did, by acting.' Phil laughed. 'I don't think his act was quite as original as mine, but on the other hand, it worked for him.'

'What was Willie's act?'

'Queer,' Phil said. 'Gay. Homosexual. Willie has a kind of sensitive face, a soft voice. When he was a kid, guys tried to pick him up in public bathrooms. That's what gave him the idea. He slicked back his hair and wore one of his old man's suits to the induction center. They sent him in to see the shrink. I always wondered if it was the same shrink I saw.

' "How long have you been a homosexual?' the shrink asked Willie.

'Willie sat on the edge of the chair and clenched his hands. Real nervous. He had good reason to be nervous, right? "I wouldn't consider myself a homosexual. I'm more bisexual," he told the guy.

' "But you have had homosexual experiences, Mr. Kaufman?'

' "Yes sir," Willie said.

' "When did that start?"

' "You mean how old was I?" Willie said.

' "That's right."

'Willie managed to blush. "Let's see, sir. Well, a boy touched me . . . touched my . . . you know . . . he touched me in junior high school."

' "A boy touched your penis in junior high school."

' "Yes, sir," Willie said. "That's what he touched."

'The shrink tried to pass it off. "Lots of boys touch each other's private parts. It's very common practice."

' "Not in my neighborhood," Willie said.

'The shrink got tough. "Don't play games with me, Mr. Kaufman. I want to know about your so-called homosexual experiences. This is a very serious matter."

'Willie stayed in character. "Yes, sir. I realize that. This is very difficult and embarrassing for me. It said on the form 'homosexual', and I had to be honest and check it off. I'd be happy to go into the Army. I'm just afraid I'd . . . you know . . . get aroused at the front or something."

' "When did you last have a homosexual experience?" the shrink wanted to know. He was probably a closet case himself, got his jollies hearing about other guys' action.

' "Let's see," Willie said. "Last Thursday."

' "Where was this?"

' "Greenwich Village," Willie said.

' "And what happened?"

' "I went to see a play and I met a very attractive person during intermission."

' "You met a man."

' "Yes, sir. That's right."

' "Then what happened?" the shrink said. That's something else they teach 'em at shrink school. Now, Jones, sit in front of the mirror and say "Then what happened?" ten times. You lose points if you smile,' Phil said. 'Hell, that's not work. Anyway, Willie told him he and this guy went out for a beer.

' "And then what happened?" the shrink said.

' "Then we had a homosexual experience."

' "Where?" the shrink said.

' "You mean where on my body or whose apartment?"

' "Both, Mr. Kaufman."

'Willie felt sick. He felt as if he really was the guy he was pretending to be. He said the shrink sounded like the voice of God, or as close as he ever wanted to get. It was June and his father's suit was wool. He was sweating like a fountain. When he crossed his legs, he did it like a queen. He didn't even mean to. Real method acting. "It was his apartment and on my penis."

' "He gave you a blow-job?"

' "Yes, sir," Willie said.'

'Jesus,' I said. 'And then what happened?'

'He let Willie go.'

CASSETTE 4 Phil D'Amico/ Alex Stephens

'Phil,' I said, 'you told me this was a story about a triangle. Where's the hypotenuse? We've been at this four days now, and you haven't told me anything about Jeannette.'

'Before there was Jeannette there was Willie and Phil,' Phil said. 'Willie and Phil went everywhere together. They told each other everything. They were close friends, bosom friends, best friends. The best. You ever have a best friend?'

'Sure,' I said.

'And what was the best thing about having a best friend?'

'No sex,' I said. 'You can be comfortable. You can be yourself. You can really care about the other person's welfare. It's sex that gets everything all messed up.'

'Correct,' Phil said 'Smart girl. Enter Jeannette.'

'Enter Jeannette,' I agreed. 'When? Where? How?'

'Sunday morning. Washington Square Park. It was just past the middle of April – I know because I'd spent all week hassling my income tax – one of those spring days the juices start flowing and you think you're gonna die if you don't have a woman. The mating season, you know? Willie and I were definitely in heat. We didn't go to the park for our health. We were there to pick up girls. Two hunters, on the prowl. We approach the circle, armed with an Italian ice and a New York *Times*. With steely eyes, we survey the scene.

'I give Willie a pep talk. "Remember, man. They *want* to be picked up. And don't take a rejection personally. If you strike out, just go right on to the next one." Then I spot my prey, a cute blonde sitting on the steps, reading a book. The book's a dead giveaway she's dying to be picked up, right? I point her out to Willie. "Mine."

'Willie looks around. There's this big moose sitting on a park

bench, a real Popeye type. Willie says, "I think I'll hit on that truck driver over there." Ha ha, Willie. Next to this guy, there's a dark-haired beauty. Willie fixes on her. We wish each other luck and divide to conquer.'

'Which one was Jeannette?'

'Whoa, girl. I'm getting to that. I approach the blonde. My mouth is watering, but I play it cool. I sit down. When I'm sure she's noticed me, I say, "My name is Phil D'Amico and I'm very lonely today."

' "That's too bad," she says. Well, it's a start.

' "I thought maybe we could have a cup of coffee," I said.

' "I'm allergic to coffee," she says. Feisty, but I don't mind. I like a challenge. "Tea?" I say.'

'And then?'

'Then Popeye the truck driver comes sauntering over and asks her to go to a poetry reading at the Reggio. A poetry reading, for Chrissake. The guy's a big mother. I play by the law of the jungle. Just to be on the safe side. I pretend I'm her interior decorator. "I'll have those color swatches for you by the first of the week, sweetie." They go off.'

'I take it she wasn't Jeannette?'

'I look around for another prospect,' Phil said. Willie, across the way, is doing better. He's got the *Times*. The dark-haired beauty asks to borrow the entertainment section. Willie likes her smile. He offers her the whole paper.

' "No, I just want the entertainment section."

'Willie gives it to her. She browses. "I'm looking for a movie," she says.

' 'Domestic or foreign?" Willie says. It was his lucky day. She hands him back the paper. "You pick it."

' "You serious?" Willie says.

"No. I'm Jeannette and I'm lonely today and I want to go to a movie. What's your name?"

'After I struck out with the blonde I looked over and saw that Willie'd scored. I thought maybe she had a friend somewhere, so I went over and said hi.

' "Jeannette, this is my friend Phil."

' "He can join us," Jeannette said.

'I didn't know where we were going, but I said, "Let's go." We went.'

'Don't keep me in suspense,' I said. 'Tell me what Jeannette looked like.[2]

'Mmmm,' Phil said. 'She looked great. She had very nice knees.[3]

'I've heard of leg men,' I said, 'but you're a real specialist.[4]

Phil laughed. 'I was a fashion photographer, remember? The boys in Paris and on Seventh Avenue had just declared war on blue jeans and the miniskirt. It was the year of the midi. So none of the models I photographed had legs. I flashed on Jeannette's knees right away. She also had a very nice everything else.[5]

'You're not being much help, Phil,[6] I said.

'Okay, okay. Let's see. Jeannette looked like a cross between a tough street kid and a madonna. There wasn't much to her, but you got the feeling she could take care of herself. Big eyes, straight nose, great cheekbones. Medium-long hair that always looked kind of messy. Felt like baby hair. Soft. They would never have hired her at Revlon. Her face had too much character, and there was something a little sad, or maybe cynical, about her smile. She wasn't model-beautiful. More like real life-beautiful.'

'Gotcha,' I said. 'By the way, what was Jeanette's last name?[7]

'From the sublime to the ridiculous,' Phil said. 'It was Sutherland.'

'Just checking,' I said. 'What happened next?[8]

'We went to the movies.'

'Don't tell me. *Jules and Jim*.[9]

'One of those *Planet of the Apes* things with Charlton Heston in a loincloth and Roddy McDowall in a monkey suit. Hundreds of pseudo-apes on horseback. It stank. That was okay. Sometimes kvetching about a bad movie is more fun than seeing a good one. Afterward we all went back to my place to smoke a joint.'

'Your studio?[10]

'Yeah. I lived there, too, you know. Had a waterbed and a refrigerator up on the balcony, everything your basic young man-about-town needs. We smoked a joint going up the elevator. Jeannette was blown away when she saw the loft.

' "Oh, wow," she said. "Is this all yours.[11]

'I really loved her for that. I never could believe it was all mine, either. It was a great loft. "Mine and the bank's," I told her.

"It was a big loft, but Jeannette filled the space. She explored, looked at everything. We were all fairly stoned. "Well," Jeannette said, "it's clear the three of us are going to be friends for the next couple of decades. The question is: What are we going to do with our lives?"[1]

'Me, I was very curious about when I was going to get laid next, but I had a great loft and a big mortgage and a job I liked, so I wasn't *too* worried about the rest of my life right then. But Willie always went for the big questions. "That's a big question," he said, and Jeannette did this sort of monologue about the rest of our lives.

' "Will Willie become a famous concert pianist, and make his debut at Carnegie Hall? Or is he gonna end up playing in *front* of Carnegie Hall? And Phil. Phil, are you gonna be the all-time champ of photographers, or are you gonna be an alcoholic? Or, I know, better yet, you can be a Jesuit monk. And Jeannette. What's gonna become of Jeannette? I mean, she's pretty . . . attractive, at least . . ."[2]

' "Pretty," Willie said.

' "And she's bright, witty, but no driving ambition. . . ."[3]

' "She's lucky," Willie said.

'Jeannette found the stairs and climbed up to my balcony. Willie and I stayed down below in the studio and tried to look up her skirt. When she got up there, she used it for a stage. Jeannette had a dramatic streak. 'I know what I could be . . . I could be a teacher. How's this? Boys and girls, this morning we're going to learn all about the American novel.'

'Willie raised his hand. I made rude noises.

'Jeannette picked up my broom. "Wait a minute. How about an actress? Is this a dagger I see before me?" She stabbed herself with the broom handle. We applauded.

' "Hang on,' Jeannette said. 'How about I could be a singer?"[4] She sang "What Is This Thing Called Love?" We sang, too. She came back downstairs. We all lay down on the floor and stared up at the skylight, wondering. We didn't know from shit. Jeannette crossed her arms behind her head and said, "I think our destinies are interlocked forever."[5]

'It gave me goose bumps,' Phil said.

A long silence. Minutes long.

'Phil? Hey, Phil. It's August 1982, and the tape's running.'[6]

'Yeah,' he said. 'That was one of the great days of my life.

When you're twenty-five it's exciting to think about the future. You can still pretend you're gonna make it big, anything seems possible, because you haven't failed yet.'

'Uh, Phil, don't look now, but I think you made it big.'

'Yeah,' Phil said. 'I'm also bald. I guess what I'm saying is, success ain't half so exciting as dreaming about success. You know what I mean?'

'Not firsthand,' I said. 'I'll let you know if I ever find out. Now, what about Jeannette?'

'Yeah,' Phil said. 'Jeannette. Willie and I were knocked on our asses. We'd never met anyone like her. She was alive. She was nuts. She was *fun*. None of those models was ever fun. There was only one problem. There was only one of her.

'The next Saturday, Willie and I discussed the problem. We were playing chess in the park. One of those tables they've got the board painted on. You wipe off the pigeon shit and play with your own men. We discussed it between moves.

' "Crazy lady," I said.

' "Lots of energy," Willie said.

' "Nice teeth," I said.

' "Good legs," Willie said.

' "Sweet breath," I said.

' "Gorgeous ass," Willie said.

' "I like her," I said.

' "She likes you," Willie said.

' "You like her?" I asked Willie.

' "Yeah," Willie said.

' "I think she's yours, then," I told him. My heart was breaking, but it only seemed right.

'Willie put me in check. "You really like her, don't you?"

' "You found her," I said. I killed off the knight that was threatening my king.

' "But you want her," Willie said "Checkmate."

'He got me with a bishop. I hadn't even seen it coming. We picked up the pieces and started to stroll in the park. I had my speech all prepared. I'd been thinking about it all week. "Listen, gumba," I said, "a woman can never come between two men who are real friends. It's not allowed. You understand? As a matter of fact, it's illegal. We can split an ice-cream cone or drink from the same cup, but a woman, we don't share," I felt like Sidney Carton, doing a far, far better thing.

'"You're crazy about her,"[1] Willie said.

'I tried to be cool. "She has a certain intrigue for me, yes. Sort of like a Tennessee Williams lady."

'"I see her more as Anna Karenina," Willie said. Leave it to Willie. I'd never even seen the movie. Anyway, she had us. We were both madly in love. We walked toward the fountain, halfway enjoying our predicament. Then, here she comes, the lady in question. Herself. Jeannette. My heart was pounding. God, she was gorgeous.

'"Hi, guys,"[2] Jeannette says. She takes us both by the arm and we keep walking, with her between us.

'"Willie is crazy about you," I say.

'Jeannette just smiles. "I know."

'"Phil's projecting," Willie says. "He's in love with you."[3]

'"I know," Jeannette says.

'"You're Willie's girl," Sidney Carton D'Amico says.

'"You have no obligations," Willie says.

'So Jeannette gets mad, sort of. She put us in our places, anyway. 'Who the hell do you guys think you are? I don't belong to anybody. Just because I'm a woman doesn't mean you have the right to decide who I belong to. Do you understand that, you bastards?"[4]

'She had a point,' I said.

'Sure,' Phil said. 'We had sort of overlooked her side of it. We apologized.

'"What do I really know about either one of you?" Jeannette said. "Absolutely nothing."[5]

'"We don't know much about you either," Willie said.

'So Jeannette filled us in. Born in Kentucky. Lived all around the South – Dallas, Galveston, half a dozen other dumpy little towns. She'd come to the Big Apple six months before to find out about life. Either make it big or give up and go home. "So far," she said, "all I've gotten is thinner."[6]

'"Broke?" Willie asked.

'"On my cute little ass."[7]

'I had to agree with her there. That it was cute, anyway. It turned out her rent was due the next day, and she didn't have a dime. She needed a place to stay or bus fare back to Kentucky.

'"You can stay with me," Willie said.

'"*Mi casa es tu casa*," I told her. My father used to say that to his lodge brothers. It means—[8]

'I get it.'

'Jeannette stopped walking and looked us over. "Are there any sexual strings attached to either offer?"

'Absolutely not, we said. We would have said anything. I would have, anyway. So Jeannette spots this old guy half-passed-out on a park bench and goes up and asks him for a dime. He's so blown away he gives her a quarter and offers her a shot of Thunderbird besides.

' "No strings," Jeannette says. "Heads, it's Willie. Tails, it's Phil."'

'I couldn't believe it,' Phil said. 'I was praying.'

'Wow, I said. 'That's really putting yourself in the hands of the gods.'

'What gods? It was fate,' Phil said. 'Jeannette was like that then. Impulsive. And broke. She went with the flow.'

'And where did the flow take her?'

Phil sighed. 'To Willie's place.'

CASSETTE 5 Phil D'Amico/ Alex Stephens

'Somehow, the way it happened, it all seemed perfectly natural, Jeannette moving in with Willie. I was jealous as hell, but I couldn't be hurt, you know? The quarter could have turned up tails. It could have been my loft instead of Willie's apartment where we were taking her stuff. We got this push-cart to move her. On the way over to Willie's, a funny thing happened. We stopped to get some pizza.'

'What's funny about pizza?'

'Nothing. Listen, will you? I knew the guy at the pizza stand. Dom. He was in my brother's class at St. Theresa's. No genius, but a nice guy. I'd known him since I was a kid. I ask him for three slices of Sicilian. He says, "How's your mother, Phil?" He knows my mother. He knows my whole family. "My mother's fine, thank you, Dom."'

' "I seen your brother last week. He's lookin' good."

' "Yeah," I say, "his wife is pregnant again."

' "Does that make three or four?" Dom asks. I tell him four. Dom says he hopes it's a boy. He's Italian, right? Of course he hopes it's a boy. It's the kind of conversation I've had a thousand times. Then Willie butts in. "Your brother's got *four* kids?"

' "Three," I tell him. "Number four is on the way."

' "How old is he?" Willie wants to know.

' "Twenty-seven," I say. "He's a machine."

'Then Jeanette pipes up. "His wife's the machine."

'And Dom decides he has to defend the honor of Italian motherhood. "His wife is a beautiful lady, lady."

' "I'm sure she is," Jeannette says. "But does she want four children?"

'So Dom looks at me. 'Where'd you find her?' And I ask myself, where'd I find her? Where'd I find Dom? I felt like I

was the ventriloquist and the dummy both. Dom's part of me. Willie's part of me. Jeannette's even part of me. Only the parts don't fit together. For the first time, I ask myself, Phil D'Amico, who the hell are you?

'"You got to excuse her, Dom. You see, she's moving in with this friend of mine over here, and she's a little nervous."

'"I'm not nervous," Jeannette says.

'Willie understands what I'm going through, but he says the wrong thing. "She's just moving in. We're not really living together." He tries to say the right thing, but it's all wrong.

'Dom shakes his head and says, "You run with a strange crowd, Phil." And I know he's gonna tell his mother that, and she's gonna tell *my* mother, and Jeannette is moving in with Willie, and Phil D'Amico is all alone in the world. All alone,' Phil said. 'I wanted to cry. Instead, I helped Jeannette move in with Willie, and drank a glass of champagne with them, and then I left them alone together, to let what was going to happen, happen. Let's take a break now, shall we?'

'Sure,' I said.

CASSETTE 5, continued

'What happened, Phil, after Jeannette moved in with Willie?'

'They got it on.'

'I thought there were no strings.'

'It depends on who's tying the strings, doesn't it?' Phil said. 'I didn't kid myself. I knew it would happen. I also knew it would make me feel terrible.'

'How did Willie feel about it?'

'How should I know? There are some things you don't tell even your best friend. Especially not if he's in love with the same lady.' I knew later, after a while, he felt a certain pressure. Mostly guilt, I think.'

'Phil,' I said, 'I need to talk to Willie.'

'You what?'

'I want to talk to Willie. I feel an obligation. It's his story, too.'

'It's my movie,' Phil said.

'Look, Phil,' I said. 'If this were fiction, I could make up a dynamite sex scene and nobody'd be any the wiser. I could have

Phil join the French Foreign Legion and ride a camel off into the sunset. Willie could get hit by a truck or drafted by the C.I.A. You name it. But these are real people. Real things happen to them. I need to hear Willie's side of the story. From Willie.

'Willie doesn't know about the film.' Silence. Then: 'I wanted to surprise him. I have this fantasy, see, of going up there to accept the best-picture Oscar and saying, "I made this film for my best friend, Willie Kaufman." '

'Well, okay, Phil. If you think you can really tell me enough for Willie's scenes. Or if you're willing to give me some poetic license. It's up to you. As you say, its your movie.'

'Jesus,' Phil said. 'I'm being blackmailed. Okay, I'll talk to Willie. But there's one thing for certain. You will never, repeat, *never* talk to Jeannette. You got that?'

'It had occurred to me. . . .'

'No way," Phil said. 'This is not Jeannette's story. Jeannette is not a character. Jeannette is fate. She's the goddess of the machine. She's the mystery, see? You can love a woman, you can make love to her, you can live with her for thirty years, but she's still a mystery. You can never understand her. You see what I'm saying?'

'Not entirely,' I confessed. 'I find women much easier to understand than men.'

'Jesus God,' Phil said. 'Why did I ever hire a woman for this job? I must have been out of my mind.'

'You thought I was a guy,' I reminded him.

Two nights later, I'm sitting in the living room of Willie Kaufman's apartment on Eighty-fourth and Riverside Drive. The apartment is spacious and many-roomed, the larger half of the top floor of the building, and has a view of the New Jersey Palisades across the river. It's furnished in a cross between Student Poor and Prosperous Young professional; there are a few nice pieces and a lot of artfully preserved and deployed junk. The Kaufmans can afford the apartment, I am told, because it's still rent-controlled; the lease has been in Ellie's family for the past twenty-seven years. It's in the name of her uncle Sid, who now lives in a retirement home in Florida.

Ellie is Willie's wife. Her blonde hair is only slightly longer than Willie's, and at least as curly. Round gold wire rims frame

round blue eyes. Her build is hard to assess, because Ellie is medium pregnant, into maternity clothes but still months from delivery. She teaches French at City College, and seems amused by my visit.

Willie, on the other hand, is nervous. He apologizes more than is necessary for never having heard of me or my two novels. I point out that this blind spot is something he shares with most of the rest of humanity.

'I'll look for them in the library,' Willie says.

I like Willie. He's gentle and soft-spoken without being humorless. His frequent smile explains the lines around his mouth and eyes; his hair begins to be frosted with white, around the temples, over his ears. I regret being part of a situation that put him ill-at-ease.

'I guess it must be pretty weird,' I say, 'agreeing to tell your life story to a stranger.'

'It's not my *whole* life story,' Willie points out.

'No, that's true.' I look at Ellie. 'Only the part of it you'd probably least like to have him relive.'

'Oh, I don't mind.' She sends me a smile that seems sincere. 'I have a past myself.'

'It must be pretty weird trying to patch together someone else's story,' Willie says.

'Well, yes. But it's a great opportunity for me. I really admire Phil's last two films.'

This permits Willie some genuine enthusiasm. 'They're terrific, aren't they? I always knew Phil could do something more important than TV commercials. He's a sensitive guy, really, when you get past his defenses.'

'He's a nice man I've enjoyed working with him.'

'Phil's great,' Willie says somewhat gratuitously. 'He's my best friend.'

The next thing to talk about is how we're going to work, but neither of us much wants to broach the subject. The result is silence a long one, relieved by throat-clearing and a few false starts.

Then Ellie laughs out loud. 'For heaven's sake, tell her, Willie.'

'Would you like some Amaretto?' Willie says. 'Or maybe another beer?' He gets up from the sofa and stands awaiting orders, a chance to flee.

'Tell her,' Ellie says.

'You tell her,' Willie says. 'I'll get the Amaretto.' He disappears into the kitchen.

'Tell her what?' I ask Ellie.

'That Willie's spent the last year writing a novel. About Willie and Phil.'

'Oh, my God. Phil doesn't know?'

In the half-light, Ellie shakes her head. 'Willie wanted to surprise him. The dedication page says, "For my best friend, Phil D'Amico."'

Willie comes back with a bottle and silver-rimmed liqueur glasses on a tray. 'You told her?'

'She did. Look, Willie, you and Phil better talk this over. I had no idea. I'm sure Phil didn't either.'

Now Willie laughs easily. 'No problem. I'll give you a copy of the manuscript. It might save us all some time.'

'I couldn't. I mean, you've spent a whole year on it. I'm sure Phil wouldn't want to . . .'

'It's okay,' Willie says. He pours the Amaretto and hands me a glass. 'Who's Willie Kaufman? Just another English teacher who tries to write a novel. Five publishers have turned it down already.'

'That doesn't mean anything. My first novel went to twelve before it got accepted.'

'I've thought it all out,' Willie said. 'Phil wants to tell the story, it's his. I'm happy to help him out.'

'That's true friendship.'

'It's also practical,' Willie says. 'Phil's got a track record. He also makes films. Besides, who reads anymore?'

'Well, if you're sure . . .'

'I am,' Willie says.

'It's a pretty good book,' Ellen tells me.

CHAPTER 9

WILLIE & PHIL
by William Kaufmar

Willie hated to see Phil go, at least as much as he hated to see his parents leave after they helped him move into the apartment in the first place. In the first case, he was afraid of being alone. Now he was afraid of being alone with Jeannette. The familiar landscape was altered by the addition of her things – her makeup bag in the bathroom, her books stacked on top of his, her plants next to his on the windowsill. He winced to see her Sugar Pops next to his Shredded Wheat. There was only one bed.

Willie played the piano till midnight. Willie left the dishes for a week. Willie slept with the window open. Sometimes he masturbated or picked his nose. In the mornings, before school, he liked to sit on the toilet and read, Zen aphorisms, *Rolling Stone*, the *Times*. It didn't matter what. It was part of his routine.

How well would Jeannette adapt to his routine? Would he meet her expectations? She might be a neatness vigilante, or an unregenerate slob. She might sing off-key in the shower. She might snore. She might bring men to the apartment. Or, Willie confronted his worst fear, they might become lovers. She might make demands he couldn't answer. They might not be compatible at all. Jeannette moved around the apartment, in and out of his peripheral vision, always in earshot, positioning her possessions, exploring the space, settling in. She made the bed. Then she came and stood near him.

'I know you're nervous, Willie. And you have a right to be. Some strange lady you barely know moves into your house. Can drive you crazy. Can change your rhythm. You may want

to be alone. Stare out the window. Think your thoughts. I don't know. But now you can't do it, 'cause there's this strange lady in the house.'

Well, she got that right. That she seemed to understand made Willie hopeful. And she was very beautiful, standing there A vision. His new roommate. Willie knew they'd have to talk, talk, and talk, but he didn't know quite what to say.

Jeannette was a verbal person. She had no shortage of words. She knew just what she wanted to say. 'I think it's possible to stay here without any sex,' she said. 'That's entirely possible. It could drive you crazy, but it's possible. On the other hand, I've been thinking. No sex at all will make sex too important. All we'll think about is will we or won't we, right?'

'Right,' Willie said. She *was* right. Still, he felt oddly as if he were losing control of his life. He tried to get it back. 'I've been thinking, too.'

'Yeah? What have you been thinking?'

Oh, she was beautiful. Willie wanted her. He was afraid of her. 'What if the coin had come up tails?'

Jeannette was a realist. 'But it didn't,' she said. 'What was I saying? No sex at all will make sex too . . .'

'Too important,' Willie finished for her.

'Right.' Her voice was brisk. 'So I want you to know, if it's all right with you, it's all right with me. It was bound to happen sooner or later, so we might as well make it sooner.'

Willie's mind could have refused her logic. Willie's body didn't want to try. 'That makes a lot of sense,' he said, and to his body, it did. They moved to the bedroom, where the bed was neatly made, thanks to Jeannette. Willie admired her foresight, her managerial skills.

'Promise me one thing, Willie,' she said, and he knew that he would.

'I'll be gentle,' he told her.

Jeannette smiled. 'You're so Jewish."

'What should I promise, then?'

'Never tell me that you love me. Just love me,' Jeannette said. That was all right with Willie. He was going to love her, starting now. He put his arms around her, and for the first time, Willie kissed Jeannette. He knew he was being awkward, but real life *is* awkward, and much as this seemed like one of his fantasies, it was really happening. The warmth of Jeannette's skin, the wet

of her mouth, the smell of her cream rinse convinced him of that. He didn't make them up. Jeannette kissed him back. Willie's head downshifted as his body revved up. They sat on the bed. They lay down on the bed. Nothing was awkward anymore. Everything felt right. They were going to make love. Only the business of undressing remained.

As they unbuttoned, Jeannette spoke. 'There's something I've got to tell you. I've got an inverted nipple.'

'Thank God,' Willie said, and he meant it.

If sex was too important after that, it wasn't for its absence.

CASSETTE 6 Phil D'Amico/ Alex Stephens

'They were really into each other,' Phil said. 'It made me happy. It made me sad. Both. Jeannette got herself a job to help out with the rent. She worked the Revlon counter at Bloomingdale's, demonstrating nail polish. I knew it was serious when they bought themselves this dumb bird. Actually, it was sort of pretty – gray, with a red head. It could talk, too. Hello, goodbye, that kind of stuff. They named it Scott, after the only writer they both liked.'

'Sir Walter Scott?'

'F. Scott Fitzgerald. He wrote for the movies, too. I laid low for a couple of weeks, then one night Willie and I got together for some serious drinking. Jeannette had to work till the store closed. "How's it going?" I asked Willie. "What's it like?" I was dying to know, I didn't want to know.

' "In some ways," Willie said, "living with a woman is like living with your mother. Except for the sex.'

' "You don't know my mother," I said. "At least Jeannette doesn't have a mustache."

'Willie stared at the foam on his beer. "I feel a certain pressure."

' "You strike me as the kind of guy who *always* feels a certain pressure."

' "True," Willie said. "But this is a new kind. So much pleasure, so much, that I shouldn't be feeling the pressure."

'So all-knowing Phil sets him straight. "Bourgeois guilt. Perfectly normal I feel pressure, too."

'Willie looked like maybe he didn't believe it, but he was definitely interested. "Work, or sex, or . . .?"

' "Everything," I told him.

' "Just life?"

'"Everything. I find myself thinking about the future all the time." I did. I hated it,' Phil said. 'Even taking pictures of beautiful women gets old after a while. Jeannette was changing Willie's life. What was gonna change *mine*?

'"Normal Italian anxiety," Willie said.

'"I want to change my life." I told him. "I want a bigger charge. You know? I'm thinking about dropping acid." It was true. I was thinking about it. Mostly I was thinking I was scared shitless of it. I mean, L.S.D. is not an Italian drug. But it sounded good, and got a rise out of Willie. Then Jeannette came in and took the bar stool between us. She was in a disgustingly good mood. "Hi, guys. I just sold seventy-five dollars' worth of nail-polish remover."

'"Great," I said. "We just drank twenty bucks' worth of beer."

'"Phil is thinking of dropping acid," Willie told her. And Jeannette says, "It's about time."

'Left on our own,' Phil said, 'Willie and I probably would have stuck to beer. But Jeannette was really up for it, and I couldn't come back down once I'd open my big mouth. So Willie got some Clear Light from the chemistry teacher at his school. Guaranteed pure. We didn't want to take any unnecessary chances. You've only got one brain, right?

'We took it at my place. A tab apiece. We put it on our tongues and washed it down with water. It was so much like going to communion, I crossed myself before I swallowed. Then we waited for the Holy Ghost. And waited. And waited. Willie and Jeannette picked up stuff and started to read. Nothing happened, except that my normal Italian anxiety turned into mild Italian hysteria. I couldn't sit still. I was concentrating so hard I could feel every bubble of gas in my gut. I kept watching Willie and Jeannette, to see if something was happening to them.

'It's murder the first time, you know? You're disappointed because nothing's happening and terrified that something will. I was driving myself crazy, pacing up and down. Then Willie starts laughing like a wild man.

'"You're getting something?" I asked.

'"Nope," Willie said. "Just going ha ha."

'"That's not funny, Morris." I used to call him Morris sometimes,' Phil said. 'It sounds more Jewish.'

' "I don't feel a thing," Willie said.

' "Jeannette, how about you?"

'She looked up from Stendhal. "It's sort of like smoking oregano."

' "Well, you know what they say. The longer it takes to hit you, the better it is."

' "This must be really great stuff," Jeannette said.

' "This is top-of-the-line acid. You know? I mean, this stuff could damage our minds forever." All of a sudden I wished I hadn't taken it. I could practically see it in there, messing up my brain cells.

' "Well, let's hope so," Jeannette said.

' "Be serious," I told her. I may be a smart, sophisticated guy, but I'm also superstitious. I didn't want the gods of the acid to pick up any challenges on my wire. Anyway, as soon as we weren't paying attention, it snuck up on us.

' "Let's take in a movie," Willie said.

' "Let's catch a movie," I said.

' "Hey, I've got an idea. Let's go to a movie," Jeannette said. Only none of us knew anybody else said it. Since we all wanted to go, we got up and went.'

'What'd you see?' I asked.

'*Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*. A very funny movie. We laughed our heads off. Everybody around us was bullshit about the noise. They finally threw us out of the theater. We thought that was pretty funny, too. Jeannette rode Willie up the aisle. Then, boom. It went bad on her. Very bad. All of a sudden, she was crying. It was like a baby cries – it's fed, it's dry, it's had a nap – and still it howls its head off. You don't know why. It can't tell you, you can't help. You just hold it. We held Jeannette. We practically carried her back to Willie's place. We got her there and she says, "I want to go home."

'Willie was very gentle with her. "This is where you live now," he told her. It wasn't good enough. She wanted to go *home* home. She cried and cried.

' "I'll make you some hot tea," Willie says. Always the Jewish mother. He went into the kitchen. Jeannette decided her hands were coming off. I always figured it had something to do with showing nail polish at Bloomingdale's all day. She was really scared. She went to the mirror, looking for her hands. I thought I'd help her get her coat off, calm her down, but she

turned on me. Gave me a good shove. I started feeling pretty strange myself. I asked her please not to push me around.

'"You're just a bastard," she says. "Just a bastard." That hurt. Willie came back. He handed her a cup. She looks at it like it's poison. "What's in here?"

'"Apple juice," Willie says.

'"You said you were making me tea."

'"We didn't have any. This is good."

'*"But you said you were making me tea!"*

'"This is really good. Drink up." Willie's real patient with her, real gentle, but Jeannette's not buying it. She heaves the cup against the wall. Smash! The damn bird goes crazy. I go crazy. Everybody's crazy except Willie.

'I go to the mirror. I look like Godzilla. "My head weighs a ton," I say.

'"I should never have come to New York," Jeannette says.

'"I don't feel a thing," Willie says.

'I'm freaking out. My head feels like a medicine ball. It *is* one. I keep remembering all the horror stories I ever heard, about people not coming back from bad trips. My friend's cousin thought he was an orange for three years. Jesus, I can't afford three years as a medicine ball. Can a medicine ball take pictures? East spaghetti? Make love? Hell, no. But I'm a medicine ball. I want to cry.

'Jeannette jumps on the bed. Willie gets down there with her, and she lets him touch her now. All of a sudden, pow! It changes again. Jeannette's laughing. Her hands came back. Now her nose is growing, but never mind. She thinks it's funny. She's giggling away. I jumped on the bed with them. I wanted to be in the middle. We held each other and laughed and laughed.

'My head lightens up. In fact, it gets real light, like a helium balloon. I can feel this big smile painted on my face. And where they touch me, I don't just feel it, I can *see* it. It glows. Willie's green. Cool Jeannette starts out orange, then turns purple, and keeps changing, through all the colors in the visible spectrum and a few that aren't. Colors I never felt before. At some point, Willie got up and started to play the piano. That left the rainbow and the helium balloon all alone on the bed,' Phil said.

CHAPTER 11

WILLIE & PHIL
by William Kaufman

Willie was sad. The drug had taken his friends away. Even as they hugged each other, he felt the distance between them. Phil and Jeannette were seeing things he couldn't see, feeling things he couldn't feel. Willie felt nothing, except sad. Where were the beautiful colors and the psychedelic shapes? The acid hadn't kept its promise to him. He felt cheated.

Willie turned to the piano for comfort. The piano always kept its promise. He sat down and began to play idly, waiting for the music to come to him Over the chords he could hear his friends rustle on the bed, could hear them talk.

He heard Phil ask tenderly, 'How's my Jeannette?'

He heard Jeannette cry softly, 'I really want to go home.'

What he heard seemed to have nothing to do with him He was grateful for Phil's tenderness. He trusted it. Willie watched his fingers on the piano keys, nimble, sure fingers that teased music from the instrument. It was hard to believe that such strong, beautiful hands belonged to him. He imagined the hidden insides of the piano, the muted hammers striking the strings, the strings responding. Like making love, he thought. The strings quivering, happy to be struck. The strings coming, Willie thought. He began to feel the music in his body, the striking of the strings, their music in response.

I am making love to the piano, Willie thought, and the thought pleased him. He looked in to the bed, and saw that Phil and Jeannette were kissing, were undressing, were making love while he played. He watched their bodies and matched the music to their movements. Music was feeling, and Willie felt their pleasure, participated in it with the music he made.

It did not occur to Willie to be jealous. He was not beyond jealousy; he did not decide not to be jealous. It was more that jealously did not exist at all in the place where Willie was. Only music, and beauty, existed there. On the bed, making love, Phil and Jeannette were very beautiful, a sculpture with the gift of movement. They moved to his music. He played to the rhythms of their lovemaking. Willie felt peaceful, untroubled, and whole.

We are all making love, Willie thought.

The first thing Willie saw when he woke up the next morning was Phil across the pillows. Phil was still asleep, and looked peaceful. The next thing Willie saw was Jeannette, already up and making coffee. Two slices of toast shot out of the toaster. The apartment smelled of breakfast. Willie stretched his legs and flexed his toes and felt his face with his fingers. He was still there. The drug was gone.

Jeannette heard him wake up. 'Good morning,' she said. 'Do you want coffee?'

'Yeah,' Willie said. It honored him that a beautiful woman would make him coffee. He got up and headed for the bathroom.

'Toast?' Jeannette called after him.

'Five slices, with marmalade.'

He sat with Jeannette at the table. 'How you feelin' this morning?' she asked. Her voice was uneasy, the way the air is uneasy before an electrical storm. Willie felt light and clear, like the air *after* a good rain. 'Tired. But nice,' he told her. 'It was real nice.'

Jeannette was still in another weather pattern, expecting a storm. 'I suppose I should say I'm not responsible for what happened last night.'

'You don't have to say anything,' Willie said.

'I knew what I was doing, Willie,' Jeannette said. Defensive. Defiant. How to convince her it was sunny and warm?

'Of course you did,' Willie said.

'I enjoyed the sex, Willie.'

'Sex is meant to be enjoyed,' Willie said.

'I didn't plan it, but after a certain point, it seemed inevitable.'

Willie's toast was getting cold, and he was very hungry. They'd neglected to eat dinner the night before. He ate. 'I'm not angry,' he told Jeannette.

'I suspect it won't happen again,' Jeannette said. 'But I can't make any promises.' She was like a prisoner who didn't know the door to her cell was unlocked. There was no prison at all. The toast tasted good. 'Promise you won't make any promises,' Willie said.

Then Phil woke up. He wrapped himself in a bedsheet for a bathrobe and got up. He looked like the sole survivor of an all-night toga party. Worse yet, he looked embarrassed. He wouldn't look Willie in the eye.

'Bono giorno,' Willie said. *'Como esta?'*

'What do you say?' Phil mumbled.

Willie took him a cup of coffee.

'You want to smash me in the face, that's okay with me,' Phil said. 'I'm an asshole.'

Where Jeannette was defiant, Phil was abject. All Willie wanted was to enjoy his breakfast. 'I'm not angry, Phil. Everything's okay.'

'I don't deserve to walk the same earth as you. I'm a terrible human being.'

Willie smiled at his friend. 'You may not deserve to walk the same earth as me, but you're still a very nice fellow.'

'Hit me, for Chrissake,' Phil begged.

The trouble with Catholics, Willie thought, is that they can't forgive themselves. 'Don't be so Italian,' he told Phil. 'It's okay.'

Willie's brand of absolution wasn't working. Phil cried. Tears rolled down his handsome Italian cheeks. He turned to Jeannette 'Im sorry, kid. I'm really sorry.' Her smile didn't comfort him, either. 'I can't even look at you.'

It was Jeannette's turn to reassure him. 'Phil, nothing has changed except we all love each other a little better, that's all. We still love you, honey.'

At least *she* understands, Willie thought. That helped It made him feel close to Jeannette 'We're not embarrassed about what happened, Phil. Everything's okay."

'Same Phil. Same Jeannette. Same Willie,' Jeannette said.

Phil took a first tentative sip of his coffee. 'Everything stays the same?'

'Right,' Willie said.

Phil drank deeper. 'It won't happen again, I swear.'

'We promised not to make any promises,' Jeannette informed him.

Phil experimented with a guilt-free attitude. 'I guess all that really happened is we . . . we touched genitals.'

Thank God, Willie thought. It's going to be okay. He was glad. What he really wanted was to talk to them about the night before, about what it was like for *him*. He grinned at Phil. 'It got pretty wild there for a while, let me tell ya.'

Too soon. Phil turned penitent again. 'Jesus, just smash me in the face. Just give me one shot, please.'

The only way to settle this, Willie thought, is to cut it short. He got up from the table, three of his five slices uneaten. 'I've got to go to school.'

Phil reached after him. 'Just make me one promise.'

Willie gathered up his books and lesson plans. 'No promises.'

'Just one,' Phil begged. 'Just promise me you won't tell my mother or any other member of my immediate family.' Phil grinned his old Phil grin. Jeannette and Willie laughed.

Their friendship had survived another test.

CASSETTE 7 Phil D'Amico / Alex Stephens

'Jeannette had too much going for her to sell nail polish for the rest of her life,' Phil said. 'She started looking through the *Times* for a better job. The jobs she thought she might like, she circled with a red pen. The ones she thought she might be able to get, she circled in green. The ones with both a red circle and a green circle, she went and applied for. The job market was a bitch. It was glutted with sweet young things with no particular skills, but Jeannette finally landed herself a job as an assistant film editor. Some naturalist had lived among the baboons for two years and he had about a million feet of raw footage. He wanted to make a documentary. Mostly what Jeannette did was synch up picture and sound. Really built up her biceps on the rewinds. I got into film the first time that year, too.'

'I thought *Brooklyn Boogie* was your first film.'

'It was. It was. I got in through the back door. Doing TV spots. Jesus.' He laughs. 'This ad agency hired me to produce and shoot the Doggie Nums campaign. Big break, right? Only they should have called in Doggie Yecch. We got six dogs from the pound. We starved 'em for two days. They still wouldn't touch the stuff. I had to put raw liver under the Doggie Nums to make them go near the bowl. It took about a hundred takes to get thirty seconds of usable film. You ever work with animals? Take my advice. Don't. I got fleas. I got bit. I got mistaken for a fireplug. I practically got rabies. What a job. But I was looking for a change from fashion models. At least the dogs had personality,' Phil said.

'What about Willie? Was he still teaching?'

'You haven't read ahead in that book of his?'

'Uh-uh. I'm taking it as it comes.'

'Okay,' Phil said. 'Willie was teaching, but his heart wasn't in

it anymore. He took this Yoga class. Not the kind for housewives to get their figures back after they have babies, the real thing, with the breathing and the philosophy and all of that. Willie loved it, he learned the Indian names for everything, he was in ecstasy the first time he managed to stand on his head.

'You'd go over to his place and find him twisted up like a pretzel, meditating Better exercise than basketball, Willie said, and good for the spirit besides. He stopped eating meat. Jeannette and Willie divided up the refrigerator – Coke and frozen pizza and Sara Lee banana cake on her side, bean sprouts and yogurt on his. Jeannette loved him, but she wasn't about to give up junk food for him. She said Willie was eating what poor people ate in the South.

'I think what Willie liked best about Yoga and all this spiritual stuff,' Phil said, 'is that you never win. I think it's illegal to succeed. You're always a beginner. That suited Willie. It accentuated his natural humility. He practically cried when he got an A for his beginning Hatha Yoga class.'

'How did you react to all this, Phil? Did Willie try to convert you, too?'

'He taught me some Yoga postures,' Phil said. 'There's one for gas and one for backache I still do. I was actually pretty good. Only I wasn't interested in the mumbo jumbo. I told Willie, I prefer the American way, with shortcuts and a pot of gold at the end of the road, and a few Big Macs along the way. Just working in film gave me all the process I wanted. Basically, we agreed to disagree. We were still best friends, if that's what you're asking. When Willie wanted to go buy a car, I went along to keep him from getting fleeced.'

CHAPTER 13

WILLIE & PHIL
by William Kaufman

A car is a machine, very large, expensive and potentially lethal machine. By instinct and on principle, Willie mistrusted machines. Anything with more than two moving parts he considered to be high technology – politically, morally, and ecologically suspect. But Willie had a problem. He wanted to get closer to nature, and he didn't consider roaches, rats, indoor plants, and apartment-dwelling dogs to be natural. To get closer to nature, he had to get off Manhattan. To get off Manhattan, he had to buy a car. There was no alternative. Buses did not regularly depart Port Authority with 'NATURE' in their destination windows. He couldn't walk through the Lincoln Tunnel without getting gassed and if he biked, Jeannette and Phil would never be induced to come with him. Willie felt duty-bound to promote their proximity to nature as well as his own.

Willie knew nothing about cars His father had bought a Rambler when the family moved to Flatbush, and later an Oldsmobile, but Willie had never learned to drive either one. Since Phil was confident in the presence of machines, had a driver's license and an at least rudimentary understanding of the internal-combustion engine, Willie enlisted his aid and advice when he was ready to start car shopping. They took the subway to Queens and on a noisy corner found the used-car lot recommended to Phil by an old high-school friend. The rows of cars in the lot filled Willie with dismay.

'How will we know which one's best?' he asked Phil.

'Leave it to me,' Phil said. 'I'll get you a good deal.'

As they advanced into the lot, they were hailed by a neatly

dressed saleswoman with aggressively red hair, who reminded Willie of Mamie, the real-estate lady in whose company the Kaufman's spent numerous weekends before settling on the house in Flatbush. The sales woman seemed quite taken with Phil. She called him 'big boy' and tried to sell him a big car. Phil pointed out that Willie was really the customer.

The saleswoman looked him over, his Indian cotton trousers, the length of his hair. Willie would have expected a similar once-over from his mother's bridge club. There was a reason he never visited his family on Wednesday nights.

'My son's got hair like yours. He looks like Veronica Lake. Remember Veronica Lake? She had the long blonde hair over her face.'

'Tell him to tie it with a rubber band,' Willie suggested.

'You guys are putting the barbers out of business, let me tell you right now.'

Phil surveyed the merchandise. 'What about the Volkswagen?' He pointed at a red bug a row or two away.

'Oh, that's a great car.' The saleswoman led them to it and patted the hood pridefully. 'Look at this, a beautiful car. She's got forty thousand miles, which is nothing for this car.'

Phil opened the door, folded himself into the driver's seat, and peered knowledgeably at all the levers and dials on the dashboard.

'She's good for a lifetime,' the saleslady said.

'I don't know about a German car,' Willie said.

'You Jewish?'

'Sort of.'

The saleslady leaned closer. 'Listen, kid, I was in Israel last year, and all you see there is Volkswagens, believe me.'

Phil completed his inspection of the dashboard esoterica and was evidently satisfied. "Can we take her out for a drive?'

'Sure You bet ' She hollered for Bert, her husband, to bring the keys. 'What do you mean, sort of?'

'Huh?'

'You said you're sort of Jewish ' Bert, balding, leisure-suited, appeared with the keys. The saleslady gave them to Phil.

'I mean I was bar-mitzvahed,' Willie said, 'and I go to a Passover seder once a year, but that's about it.'

'Is your mother Jewish?' the saleswoman asked.

'Yeah.'

'Then you're Jewish, kid. Just like me. You got a little more hair than me, but it's Jewish hair.'

Willie'd never thought of his hair that way before. He couldn't resist touching it.

'So how much is the car?' Phil said.

Satisfied that Willie was indeed Jewish, the woman slashed a thousand dollars off the sticker price. Willie wondered if a yarmulke would have been good for another grand.

'Let's take her out,' Phil said. Willie climbed in the passenger seat and Phil started the car.

'Say, if it's going to be his car, don't you think you ought to let him drive it?' the woman asked.

'I can't drive,' Willie told her. Phil drove the car a few blocks, then pulled into a supermarket parking lot and tested reverse. He got out, lifted the hood, and looked inside. 'Well, it's got an engine,' he said. Willie peered at the oily geometry of the motor. The maze of wires looked like dirty spaghetti. 'Is it a good engine?' Willie asked.

Phil shrugged. 'How should I know? I'm not a mechanic. I just know you should never buy a car without looking under the hood first.'

'Am I going to buy it?' Willie asked.

'Sure,' Phil said. 'Why not?'

CASSETTE 7, continued

'You want to know what true friendship is?' Phil asked me. 'I'll tell you. True friendship is teaching Willie Kaufman how to drive. Also true grit. I should have made him buy an automatic. It took him weeks just to get the accelerator, the brake pedal, and the clutch sorted out. He kept saying he didn't see how people could drive without three feet. And the gear shift! A simple H, right? Only Willie thought it was an X. I almost cried, thinking of those nice gears dropping their little teeth.

'The worst thing was parking. It was a month before Willie got his license. But you can't just leave a car in the same parking place on the streets of New York for a month or you go bankrupt from the tickets. The street cleaner's coming. The meter maid's coming. You can only park here from midnight till six a.m. Alternate sides of the street only. You gotta keep moving it

around. All hours, day and night. I practically had to move in with Willie and Jeannette.

'One day, just before he went for his driver's test, Willie decided he was going to move it himself. For the practice. Jeannette and I went down with him, to cheer him along. Willie finally gets the car started, he gets the clutch engaged, he pulls out into the street. A fire engine comes tearing around the corner, siren screaming. Willie panics. Kills the engine. Starts it up and pops the clutch. The firemen are going bullshit. They call Willie every name in the book.

'Jeannette yells, "Where's the fire?" and I think they're gonna hose her down. When Willie finally gets the car going, he can't get it in the spot. With a Volkswagen, for Chrissake. You could put a Cadillac in that spot. Not Willie. By the time he got the VW rammed in there, he'd lost both taillights and the use of the trunk. All in all, he was damn lucky,' Phil said.

'How so?' I asked.

'That he had a car left when he went to take his test,' Phil said.

CHAPTER 12

WILLIE & PHIL
by William Kaufman

The gods were with him. Willie passed parallel parking and they gave him his driver's license. Willie questioned the Department of Motor Vehicles' wisdom in doing so, but the test went magically well, and the examining bureaucrats had no way of knowing that he still sometimes mistook second for fourth or the brake for the gas. To celebrate getting it, Willie and Phil and Jeannette drove to the country for a picnic in Harriman State Park.

The farther they got from Manhattan, the better Willie felt, but the open countryside, the naked horizon, seemed to make Phil nervous, as if he were venturing into strange and possibly hostile territory.

'On your right is a tree,' Willie told him.

Phil looked out the window. 'Where?'

'The thing with all the branches.'

'You mean the large thing with the greenish leaves?'

'Yeah. That's a tree,' Willie said. It was still difficult for him to drive and talk at the same time. Phil told him he was going too fast. As soon as Phil said it, it seemed to Willie that the car really was speeding along, almost out of control. 'Do I downshift or brake?'

'Just take your foot off the accelerator,' Phil advised, but the message got waylaid on the way from Willlie's ear to his brain to his foot, which pressed down even harder on the gas. The car bolted forward, the tires squealed, Willie's heart almost stopped.

'Let me drive,' Phil said.

But Willie wanted to show him he could do it, and he did. To his immense relief, Harriman State Park had a huge, empty parking lot All Willie had to do was stop the car and turn it off. They headed into the woods. It made Willie absurdly happy to walk with his friends in the woods. They looked different, better, more beautiful in the clean air and leafy sunlight. Willie, at least, was at peace, very glad he'd invested in the car.

Being in the country mellowed Jeannette. She talked easily as they walked 'When I was a little girl, we had a pony. He was brown and black and had a white spot on his forehead. We called him White Spot. My sister called him Wy-Pot. She couldn't pronounce the S.'

'Where's your sister now?' Phil asked.

'Still in Kentucky.'

'Married?'

'She's only nineteen. She says she's going to be an airline stewardess.'

'Is she beautiful?' Phil asked.

'Very. She looks like my father did.'

And so on. Willie only half-listened. He'd asked Jeannette the same questions, and he knew all the answers. But then, he'd won the toss He had the advantage of living with her. It pleased him to eavesdrop as Phil discovered her, too.

'All over the South, honey chile,' Jeannette said. 'My daddy was a traveling salesman.'

'Sounds nice,' Phil said.

'Mostly it was sad Every time we'd find a home we'd get up and move three months later.'

Willie had heard about Jeannette's sadness before, in almost the same words. She was repeating the litany of her past, but Willie imagined the reality behind the words, and was sad again for a small Jeannette he never knew. He tried to change the mood.

'Tell him about the king snake,' Willie urged. He liked the story of the king snake: it seemed impossibly exotic to him

Jeannette obliged. 'We had a pet king snake. We were living near Galveston and my daddy kept a king snake on the property.'

Phil drawled back, in a dreadful Brooklyn / Southern accent, 'Your daddy sounds pretty weird.'

'King snakes aren't dangerous And they kill rodents.'

Willie was a little disappointed in the king snake the second time around. It seemed to him that it was a better story the first time he heard it, with more embellishments. Phil liked it, though, and Willie liked Phil for liking it and Jeannette for telling him.

Suddenly Willie wanted to subtract himself from the triangle; he wanted to be alone with the sun and the green, he wanted to let Phil and Jeannette be alone for a while, too. He slipped away into the woods and his own thoughts. They were welcome, if they wanted, to talk about him.

A blue jay denounced him loudly as he trespassed on her turf. 'Peace, bird,' Willie said to the jay.

CASSETTE 8 Phil D'Amico / Alex Stephens

'We were really high. All of a sudden, I could just imagine my old man bringing a king snake home after work. "Hey, Maria. Look what I got! A nice king snake to eat the rodents!' You gotta understand, my mother'd never even go near the snake house at the zoo. She waited outside while we kids went through. We'd come out and try to scare her. Willie got up and wandered off in the woods someplace. I asked Jeannette how she was doing.

' "Truckin' along," she says.

' "Happy?"

' "Most of the time. How 'bout you?"

' "Sometimes," I said. I never lied to Jeannette. Almost never. "How about Willie?"

'Jeannette smiled the way my mother smiles when she talks about her kids. "Very serious. He says he wants to go to India."

' "I hope he doesn't drive."

' "When are you going to find a girlfriend?' Jeannette asked me. I wondered that myself. God knows, I'd been window-shopping, even collecting free samples from time to time, but nothing seemed to take. I wasn't about to recount my amorous adventures for Jeannette's amusement. I figured she was angling for a compliment. "You been talking to my mother?" was all I said.

' "You're in love with me, aren't you?"

'I told her no.

' "We don't lie to each other, Phil," Jeannette said.

'Shit, I thought, at least let me lie to myself, lady. I told her what I told myself, "I love you like a sister, kid."

' "You never slept with your sister." Jeannette was not one for letting you off the hook. Usually, that was part of her charm.

' "You're not going to let me forget that, are you?"

' "How can you forget it?" she said. I remembered. Boy did I remember. But I didn't know till then that *she* did. Part of me wanted to jump on her right then and there and do it again. I restrained myself. "But we agree it was nothing but sex."

' "It was," she said. "But a lot of things have changed since then."

'We were in this beautiful place, but all I could see was Jeannette. She was more gorgeous than any of Willie's trees. I couldn't believe what she was saying. For thirty seconds I was ecstatic. Are you telling me that you're in love with me?'

'But no. She loved me, but she didn't *love* me. The old distinction. "You just seem kind of hung up on me, Phillie. Part of me likes it, and another part of me wishes you would stop."

'That was a karate chop to the scrotum, I'll tell you. I felt like she'd been leading me on, playing with me. I got mad. 'Hey, I love Willie, and I love you. And the only way I'll stop loving you is to kiss off.' "

'You fought?'

'We went swimming. Willie discovered this gigantic lake and yelled for us to come see it. We ran down to the edge of the water, and Jeannette gave Willie a big bear hug. We all took off our clothes and jumped in and splashed and yelled and danced around and around. We didn't talk about it any more. It always made a lot of sense until we started talking about it,' Phil said. 'We had a terrific time.'

CHAPTER 13

WILLIE & PHIL
by William Kaufman

It was time for Willie to take Jeannette home to Brooklyn to meet his parents, not because they had any big announcements to make or blessings to ask, but just because it was time. All three of them were a big part of Willie's life, and it didn't feel right for them to be strangers. Willie and Jeannette drove to Flatbush for an early dinner one Saturday. They pulled up in front of his parents' house.

'This is it?' Jeannette said.

'This is it.'

'Very fancy.'

'Not fancy,' Willie said. 'Home.' It was a nice house, Willie thought, with a neatly crew-cut patch of lawn. He was anxious to go inside.

'Wait,' Jeannette said. 'I want to to comb my hair.' He waited on the curb while she did. 'You look beautiful,' he told her.

His mother looked good, too. She'd been to the beauty parlor, he could tell. Her hair was immaculate and looked slightly unreal. Once, when he was in high school, she'd gotten a rinse that was *too* blonde, but this one was just right. Kissing her, he smelled her best perfume. His father had on a shirt and tie. They both looked nice, but not *too* nice. The living room was like that, too, maybe a little too full, but not flashy. At least you couldn't look at it and name the decorator. To Jeannette, his parents were polite but warm. Jeannette was Jeannette.

Willie was amazed how much of him was still in evidence – the piano he'd learned to play on, the clay vase he made his mother in the fifth grade, half a dozen little Willies in framed

snapshots, Smiling Baby, First Day of School, After the Bar Mitzvah, Playing with the Dog, Cap and Gown. Jeannette visited each Kodak shrine with just the right mix of interest and irreverence.

Jeannette offered to help his mother in the kitchen, and Willie went out back to say hello to his old dog, Rufus, a canine geriatric who'd been part of the family since Willie's junior-high-school days. For old times' sake, Rufus summoned the energy to jump up and lick Willie's face. Through the screen door, he could hear the women exchanging pleasantries about chopped liver.

'It really looks delicious,' said Jeannette, who in Willie's experience wouldn't touch any kind of liver, even on a dare.

'In the old days,' Willie's mother said, 'there was a wonderful delicatessen around the corner that made better chopped liver than me. Today, they sell hot tamales.'

Willie heard his father's voice, a little wounded, say, 'It's still a nice neighborhood.'

'It's nice if you want to have a police dog with you at all times of the day,' Willie's mother said, and fearless Jeannette laughed in sympathy. So far, so good.

They ate outside, on the porch. His mother trotted out all her specialties, Willie's childhood favorites, an ethnic feast – chopped liver, stuffed derma, enough to make Willie nostalgic for his meat-eating days All she'd overlooked was the pickled herring. It seemed both natural and wonderful to see Jeannette at his parents' table. If she was nervous or bummed out, it didn't show. She sparkled quietly for his folks, and Willie could see his father's eye approve his choice.

'Is this where Willie was born?' Jeannette asked.

His mother looked up from her plate. 'In this house?'

'Yes.'

'Willie was born in the Brooklyn Jewish Hospital,' his mother said.

'I was born in the Willie Kaufman wing.'

'I was born in my house,' Jeannette said.

His mother was always interested in childbirth stories. She could tell you where and when each of Willie's cousins was born, after how long a labor, with what complications. She especially liked the complications. 'Was there a doctor in attendance?' she wanted to know.

'No, she was delivered by a field hand,' Willie said.

His mother groaned. 'My son, who has an IQ of 153, makes bad jokes.'

'Willie's turn to groan. Was it worse to have a high IQ, or a mother who liked to talk about it? She'd practically physically attacked the school counselor who told her 153 was only 'low gifted'. The counselor mollified her by saying there were some kinds of aptitude the tests couldn't measure. After that, his mother decided Willie was a musical genius, and doubled his practice time for a while.

'I was supposed to be born in a hospital,' Jeannette said, 'but it all happened so fast that by the time my father got the car started, I was halfway out of my mother's womb.'

'What kind of car was he driving?' Willie's father asked, and Willie's mother gave him her 'oh, that's my retarded husband, don't mind him' look.

'A Ford, I think,' Jeannette said. 'But it was attached to a trailer.'

'I'd love to rent a trailer one of these days and take a trip across the country,' Willie's father said. He'd been saying that for years. Whenever he did, Willie's mother said that was no vacation, cooking and cleaning a trailer.

'You'd have a good time,' Jeannette said. 'It would be fun.'

'You're not eating, Willie,' Willie's mother said.

'I'm eating the lettuce, Mom.'

'I spent all week making this chopped liver, Willie.'

Willie smiled. He refused to be guilt-tripped over liver. 'I'm sure it's good, Mom. But I'm not eating meat these days.'

His mother was not easily deflected from mothering. Now she turned to Jeannette. 'Do you mind if I get personal, Jeannette?'

'No, not at all,' Jeannette said, and for a minute Willie held his breath. What did his mother consider personal? Do you change your underwear everyday, Jeannette? What's your religion? Is my son a good lover?

'Are you two going to get married?' Willie's mother asked.

'I don't know,' Jeannette said.

Willie admired Jeannette's composure. His was less. 'Mom, I told you all about our situation.'

'We don't mean to pressure you, Willie,' Willie's father said.

'We understand that these are not the old days. Its just a little confusing to us, that's all.'

Willie was still squirming, stunned from the quick trip from chopped liver to wedding cake Tell her I slept with my teddy bear till I was ten Tell her I forgot my piece in the middle of my first recital. Tell her I ate dirt. But don't do this to me. 'It's pretty confusing to us, too, Dad,' was all he said.

'We don't object to the sexual side of it,' Willie's mother said. 'We know that these days young people experiment, live together . . .'

'And it's probably a good thing,' Willie's father said. 'A lot of marriages that shouldn't happen are avoided.'

'Absolutely,' Willie's mother said. 'Plenty of people we know probably wouldn't have gotten married if they'd lived together.'

'Half of them!' Willie's father affirmed.

Would you? Willie thought. His parents were either very discreet, or they didn't have a sex life. Willie hoped, for their sake, it was discretion.

Willie's mother flashed her biggest smile. 'So when are you getting married?'

Jeannette smiled back. 'To tell you the truth, Mrs. Kaufman, I may never get married.'

Willie's mother's lips compressed into the tight line he knew meant anger. 'Then what's the point? If your mind is already made up, what's the point?' Willie hoped Jeannette wouldn't tell her. To hear about women's independence at this late date would only make her madder. 'What about you, Willie?' his mother said. 'Do *you* ever want to get married?'

'I really don't know,' Willie said. 'I'd like to wait awhile, find out more about myself, before I make that kind of commitment.'

'You were a very intelligent child, Willie, but something has happened to your mind.'

Willie could only agree. His mother took a few bites of chopped liver, to calm herself. 'All right. It's your life. But let me ask you a question.'

'Sure Mom,' Willie said.

'How would you feel if you brought Jeannette over to meet your father and myself and we weren't married? He was just some man I was living with for twenty-nine years while we were trying to find out about ourselves?'

'It'll be thirty in January,' Willie's father said.

Jeannette caught Willie's eye and smiled. Courage, Willie.

'That's a wonderful question, Mom,' Willie said.

'I hope you can give a wonderful answer.'

Willie was proud of her, really, for asking such a question. He answered honestly. 'I'd probably be embarrassed, but I'd hate myself for feeling that way.'

'Aha!'

'I'm a very middle-class character,' Willie said. 'But I'm working on it.'

'I hope so,' Jeannette said.

Willie's mother blamed it all on television.

After dinner, Willie and Jeannette went home and got stoned.

CASSETTE 9 Phil D'Amico/ Alex Stephens

Phil said, 'Jeannette was very understanding about the Kaufmans. "Your mother loves you, Willie," she said. "She wants you to be happy. She just doesn't know what to tell her Mah-Jongg partner."

'"Her Mah-Jongg partner's kid ran off to San Francisco and became a female impersonator," Willie said. "I don't see why she's worried about me."

'"Don't worry about it, Willie," I said. "Mothers are supposed to be neurotic. It's part of the job description."

'"What would *your* mother have said, Phil?" Jeannette asked.

'"When are you going to become a Catholic, Jeannette?" Relax. At least the Kaufmans didn't ask you to study the Talmud."

'"Wait a minute," Jeannette said. "I'd make a good Jew. I've got a terrific sense of humor."

'"You can't become a Jew," Willie said. 'We're born, not made."

'"Liz Taylor did," I pointed out.

'"Liz Taylor also has gotten married four times," Jeannette said "I don't even know if I want to do it once."

'Willie was sitting at the piano, picking out chords. He played a few bars of the Wedding March.

'"You're making me nervous, Willie," Jeannette said

'"Me, too," Willie said. "What gets me is, all they talked about was marriage Not a word about love. They didn't ask us if we loved each other.' He started to play "What Is This Thing Called Love?" Jeannette and I went over to the piano and sang along. When we were done, Jeannette said, "We're going to Kentucky to meet my momma."

'I told them to drive carefully,' Phil said.

CHAPTER 18

WILLIE & PHIL
by William Kaufman

What did Willie know about the South? Scarlett O'Hara and Blanche DuBois. *Tobacco Road* and *Andersonville*, *The Sound and the Fury*. His parents took him to Washington, D.C., once when he was a kid, to see the Capital. He'd been back once more, to demonstrate against the war. He had an uncle in Miami Beach. None of this, he figured, would help him much in Kentucky.

It was early August and enormously hot on the drive South. They opened every window in the VW, and Willie drove as fast as he could, to make a breeze. Jeannette's hair whipped around her face, got in her eyes and mouth. Their thighs stuck to the car seat and made a noise when the got up. When they got a cold drink, they saved the ice to suck on between stops. Driving at midday, Willie saw mirages in the heat waves rising off the road. His eyes hurt from the glare.

It was the first time they'd traveled together out of their tight Manhattan world. Willie liked traveling with Jeannette; there was something free, something gypsy about her on the road. Before they left, she made a double batch of Alice B. Toklas brownies for them to eat en route.

'With your hair, Willie, if one of those Southern cops stop us, he'll take the car apart. But you can't get arrested for possession of brownies.'

The brownies tasted like chocolate hay, but they did the trick. Willie liked the ingested high, slower and mellower than smoke. Sometimes they talked, sometimes they sang, sometimes Jeannette took a nap as they drove. She leaned her head back against

the seat and drifted easily in and out of sleep. Willie watched the wind spin tendrils of hair across her cheeks and forehead. He memorized her profile.

The world greened as they moved south, got past the stink of south Jersey and Baltimore, the stony self-importance of D.C. At a certain point the surrounding country seemed to become more important, more imposing than the road running through it, and Willie knew he was someplace he'd never been before. Jeannette pointed out the carcasses of small animals, coon and skunk, possum and porcupine, beside the road. In Kentucky they left the Interstate for increasingly narrow roads through increasingly beautiful country. Traffic noise, human noise disappeared, until they could hear the hum of grasshoppers and crickets in the fields. Willie was enchanted by the greenness of the hills. 'It's so beautiful,' he kept saying to Jeannette. 'Why did you ever leave?'

'It's so boring,' she told him, 'I couldn't stay.'

Suddenly, deep in Kentucky, a landscape of tobacco fields and neat farmhouses. Jeannette leaned forward and said, 'There it is! Take your next right.' Willie turned Everything was so picturesque, so different from anything he'd known, Willie felt as if he were coming in for a landing on a strange planet. 'Is this where you go after you die?' he asked Jeannette.

She laughed 'That's what I said when I first saw New York.'

They pulled into the gravel drive. Jeannette leaned forward, craned out the window, excited as Willie had ever seen her. 'Where's Patti? Where's my little sister? Oh, there she is! Where's Momma?'

Two women and a white frame house grew larger as they approached. They descended on the car when it arrived, and Willie found himself in the middle of a confusion of embraces and compliments and questions, with honeyed Southern accents, buzzing in his ears. Then Jeannette extricated herself enough to make her introductions. 'Momma, Patti, this is Willie.'

Willie felt a little overpowered both by their warmth and the frankness of their appraisal, but he managed a hello. Wanda Sutherland extended her hand. She was an attractive woman well-kept, with a core of dignity inside her warmth Willie looked for Jeannette in her. She called him Mr. Kaufman. 'Please call me Willie,' Willie said.

Sister Patti, exuberant as a new puppy, made Jeannette, for all

her boundless energy, seem calm. She touched Willie's arm, almost as if he were a new car. 'My God, are all the Jewish boys in New York this cute?' Wanda shushed her younger daughter. 'Cut it out, Patti,' Jeannette said. But Patti wouldn't hush. 'You've got gorgeous eyes, honey. And your hair. I wish I had hair like that.'

'I use a cream rinse every other day,' Willie said.

Wanda gave him a wonderful smile, welcoming and apologetic both. 'Please don't judge the South by my younger daughter, Mr. Kaufman . . . Willie.'

Willie smiled back. 'Where should I put the luggage?'

Patti took his arm. 'In my bedroom, honey. Follow me.' Willie looked to Jeannette for guidance, and her eyes told him he was on his own. He picked up the bags and followed Patti into a small, cool entry hall, up tall stairs to the second floor. Following Patti, it was impossible for him not to notice that she, like her sister, had a very cute little ass.

'Put it all in here for now, honey,' Patti drawled. She stood in the door frame, so Willie had to brush against her as he entered the bedroom. Patti grinned. 'This is my room. Do you like it?'

Willie was overwhelmed by it – a storybook fantasy of femininity, all white and pinkness and fluttering ruffles, bouquets of tiny flowers on the wallpaper, a canopied bed with a gigantic pink plush bear reclined on it, staring up at a white organdy sky. Mirrors, too. Willie could see himself, perplexed, over the dresser and behind him, Patti grinning brashly. Again she laced her arm through his. 'C'mon, I'll show you where the bathroom is.'

After Patti's guided tour of the house and yard, they found Jeannette and Wanda in the kitchen. 'It's a beautiful house,' Willie said.

'Thank you, Willie. You'll sleep in Jeannette's old room, and Jeannette will stay with Patti,' Wanda told him. 'You can sort your bags out later.'

'He can stay with me if he wants,' Patti said.

Wanda shook her head. 'Southern girls can be very silly, as you can see, sir. But they're mostly a lot of talk. Now, would you like to eat, or would you like to freshen up?'

Willie looked around the well-stocked kitchen. 'I'm just about ready for my first Southern cooking. Where are the grits?'

Willie really liked it when Wanda called him 'sir'.

CHAPTER 19

Jeannette rode in front. At first, Willie, behind her, gripped her tightly around the waist for safety. Gradually he found his balance on the horse's bony spine and started to relax a little. The animal's long, rhythmic stride carried them around the farm.

Jeannette laughed. 'Can you imagine Phil on a horse?'

'I can image him *talking* to a horse,' Willie said. 'What's your opinion of Plato, horse?'

'Momma's disappointed that you didn't bring a skullcap, Willie. She thought all Jewish men wore hats.'

'I haven't worn a yarmulke since my cousin Alan's wedding.'

'Speaking of weddings,' Jeannette said, 'Momma said if my daddy were still alive, he'd have his shotgun out by now.'

Willie laughed. 'No offense, but I'm glad he's not, then.'

'That's what happened to Momma,' Jeannette said. 'Her daddy saw *my* daddy trying to kiss her, and that was it.' Without warning, Jeannette squeezed the horse and brought it to a fast trot that made Willie's teeth rattle in his jaw. He slid his arms around Jeannette's waist and held on tight. 'Poor Momma,' Jeannette said, more to herself than to him.

CHAPTER 20

'Dinner was wonderful,' Willie said. 'Let us help you with the dishes.'

'You leave those to Patti,' Wanda told him. 'Are you sure you don't want another piece of pie?'

'Positive. I've put on five pounds already.'

Jeannette pulled him up from the table. 'What you need is a walk. Come on. I want to show you the barn. I used to play in the hayloft when I was a little girl.'

'You two go on,' Wanda urged. They did

It was nearing sunset, still warm and very quiet except for the steady subliminal buzz of crickets, a kind of natural white noise, and the occasional distant barking of a neighbor's dog. Willie took Jeannette's hand as they wandered toward the barn. 'I like your mother.'

'She likes you, too.'

'I never met a mother like her. She's real warm and gracious. There's just none of that high powered emotion I'm used to.'

'My daddy had all the high-powered emotion.'

'It's the opposite of the Jewish family.'

'There's plenty of emotion,' Jeannette said. 'But it's not considered good manners to express it.'

They were at the door of the barn. Jeannette reached for the latch, but Willie worked his arm around her shoulders and turned her to him. 'Do you love me?' he asked. The question was not frivolous He wanted, needed to know.

She accepted his kiss without returning it. 'Mind your manners,' she said.

The barn was tall and dim, its rafters full of nesting swallows. Here and there, where the planks had shrunk out of fit, a thin crack let in slivers of light. A rich, musty vegetable aroma filled the air. 'Sometimes I think my life is a dream,' Willie said.

'This used to be a tobacco barn,' Jeannette told him. She was matter-of-fact.

'You don't like it when I get poetic, do you?' Willie laughed. Maybe Jeannette was right; the barn had a poetry of its own that he was hard put to match.

'My uncle Webster owned this place,' Jeannette said. She wandered as she talked, and her footsteps set off little explosions of brown dust. 'He was a terrible gambler. They'd have big poker games in the barn. One day he had an awful losing streak and ran out of money. So he put up this field as collateral. He had a full house, see. Nines over threes.'

As she spoke, they climbed an old, worn wooden ladder to the hayloft. 'He lost?' Willie asked.

'To four fives,' Jeannette said. 'Can you believe that?'

What hay was left in the loft was old, dry, and dusty. The loft had its own set of doors that opened onto the sunset. They moved toward the light and sat, their legs hanging free out the open hayloft doors, sixteen feet above the ground.

'It took him three years to buy the field back, and by then the land went bad and it was practically worthless. Let's make a baby, Willie.'

Willie wasn't sure he'd heard her right. He thought she said she wanted them to make a baby. He looked at Jeannette.

'It's time,' she said. 'I want a girl.'

Nothing in Willie's most pornographic fantasies had ever been quite so exquisitely exciting. Willie quelled his objections, quieted his fears, silenced his reason. When a lady asks, a gentleman does not refuse. Willie kissed Jeannette once, then again, and again. They closed the hayloft doors, shut out the red sky and the world at large, and in the darkness they lay down and made a baby.

CASSETTE 10 Phil D'Amico/ Alex Stephens

'Jeannette was eight months pregnant on their wedding day,' Phil said. 'She looked like she'd swallowed a beach ball. On the subway on the way to City Hall, I sat across the car and watched her dress move when the baby kicked. Her sister, Patti, came to New York for the wedding. She was a cute little thing, Patti, shorter and rounder than Jeannette She was wildly excited to be in New York. Read every placard in the subway car. When she got to the one about jock itch, she laughed out loud.'

'Was Willie nervous?' I asked.

'Was Willie nervous? Willie acted like he invented nervous. He was wearing a corduroy sport coat and his ponytail. Everybody thought I was the bridgroom. I was wearing a suit and tie,' Phil said. 'It turned out weddings were big business. City Hall was a mob scene. We were very lucky to find a bench If Jeannette was worried about being conspicuous, she shouldn't have been. There was a pretty little Puerto Rican girl there with a belly as big as hers, also waiting to make its contents legitimate. She waddled over and sat down by Jeannette. "Hi. What month are you in?" she asked.

' "Eighth," Jeannette said. "How about you?"

' "Seventh. I feel him moving all the time."

'Jeannette folded her hands over her belly. "She was kickin' me this morning like nothin' else."

' "You want a girl, eh?"

' "Yes," Jeannette said. "How about you?"

'The girl pointed out her groom. "He wants a boy. Me, I don't care as long as it's healthy."

'Willie had finished off his fingernails and was looking around for something else to chew when a guy came in and called,

"Kaufman and Sutherland. This way, please." He could barely walk when he got up to get the form. At the last minute, his folks came racing up. "Willie, we're here."

'Were they not going to come?'

'I guess they thought about it. But they were pretty liberal. My folks would have disowned me, but the Kaufmans showed up. The clerk hustled all of us into this room they called the Chapel.

' "You made it, Mom," Willie said.

' "What's right is right," Mr. Kaufman said. Mrs. K. looked around. It wasn't exactly the Temple of Love. Just a plain little room with a wooden platform up front. "It's like getting married on the subway," Mrs. K. said.

'The guy who was doing the honors didn't want to mess around with nicey-nice. He asked Willie's dad for the license. "Not me, my friend," Mr. K. says. "Him. I've already tied the knot."

'It turned out the guy had a stutter. Maybe he did everything else so fast because it took him so long to talk. "Just stand in front . . . front . . . front of the dais, please."

'Willie and Jeannette stepped up. Patti decided to introduce herself to the Kaufmans. "I'm Jeannette's sister, Patti." The Kaufmans responded. The clerk looked down his nose through his half-glasses and asked for qui . . . qui . . . quiet.

' "Who are you?" Mrs. K. asked me.

' "I'm Phil D'Amico."

' "Oh, yes. Willie's Italian friend."

'Jeannette took Willie. Willie almost didn't get to take Jeannette. It took the guy three tries to get his name out. "Do you take this woman to be . . . to be . . . to be . . ."

' "I do," Willie said.

' "Not yet. To be your lawful wedded . . . wedded . . ."

' "I do." Willie said.

' "Wife?"

' "I do," Willie said.

'He did. He did. He did. They gave each other the rings, and then by the authority vested in him by the state . . . by the state . . . by the state of New York, they were married. Willie kissed the bride. I kissed the bride. Everybody kissed everybody else. I wanted to cry, but since Mrs. Kaufman wasn't, I figured it would be bad form. Mr. K. and I threw Minute Rice on them

instead. The clerk hustled us out and the Puerto Ricans in. Mrs Kaufman couldn't believe it. "It's like a maternity ward in here," she says.'

CHAPTER 22

WILLIE & PHIL
by William Kaufman

It was a nice wedding party – champagne, cake, gouda cheese. They had it in the little courtyard outside Willie's apartment. Everyone Willie loved best was there. His parents were so glad to see him married, they didn't bitch about the circumstances. Phil didn't cry or do anything overt to make Willie feel guilty for having married Jeannette. Looking at Jeannette's belly, Willie was convinced he'd done the right thing. The only thing.

Phil took pictures and told Italian jokes. Patti bubbled. Willie's mother ate cake and beamed. Willie's father laughed at Phil's Italian jokes. Jeannette smiled a lot and tried to stay off her feet. Willie drank champagne.

At a discreetly early hour, Willie's parents headed back to Flatbush to leave 'you young people' alone. Willie and Jeannette walked them to the door. 'Please take a piece of wedding cake,' Jeannette said.

Willie's mother declined. 'We're both on a diet.'

'As a matter of fact,' Willie's father said, 'we've both been on a diet for the last ten years.'

They said their good-byes and went. Willie was less down than he'd feared, and less happy than he'd hoped. It was a feeling he remembered from his birthday parties as a kid. Jeannette was reasonably mellow as she walked back to the garden beside him. 'I really like your parents,' she said. 'They've got so much emotion.'

As they entered the garden, Phil pointed his Nikon at them. They made faces at him. The shutter clicked. 'I'm going to California,' Phil said.

'When?' Willie asked.

'In a week or so.'

'For how long?'

'For good,' Phil said 'I'm splitting.'

Willie didn't believe it. He didn't want to. 'What are you talking about?' Jeannette sat down at the table, where Patti was picking frosting off the wedding cake. Willie sat beside her.

'I've got an offer,' Phil said. 'Commercials. Good money.'

'Big bread?' Jeannette teased.

'Great deal,' Phil said. 'Great deal.'

'You'll die out there, Phil,' Willie said.

Phil paced the garden. 'Listen, kid, there are a lot of very bright people out on the Coast.'

'There are a lot of bright people in Germany, but I don't want to live there.'

'California is not Germany,' Phil said.

The wedding cake went leaden in Willie's stomach. He wanted an Alka-Seltzer. He wanted to beg Phil not to leave.

'Why don't I understand what they're talking about?' Patti said.

Jeannette said to her sister. 'Phil is in love with me and he wants some distance.'

When she said it, it sounded plausible, it sounded right. 'Gumba, is that true?' Willie asked.

Jeannette smiled at him. 'Remember when we first met? That first crazy day?' Jeannette's belly bore witness to how much had changed since then.

' "Our destinies are interlocked forever"?' Three was an edge, an irony in Phil's voice.

'We can't help ourselves,' Jeannette said.

But Phil wouldn't melt. 'We can try.'

Patti leaned across the table, intent. 'I still don't get it.'

'We all love each other,' Willie explained. It didn't help.

'What do you mean by love?' Patti wanted to know.

'Affection, emotion, passion, sex, desire, laughter, friendship, longing, lust, boredom, tears, hatred, sadness joy, sex, desire . . . you know. Love.' Jeannette sounded like a thesaurus.

Willie sang, 'What is this thing called love?'

Phil sang, 'This crazy thing called love?'

Willie and Phil and Jeannette sang, 'Just who can solve its mystery? Why does it make a fool of me?' It was like a reprise

of the last three years. Good years that Willie didn't want to end.

Patti clapped her hands, delighted. 'I just love the Big Apple,' she said.

'You ain't seen nothin' yet, kid,' Willie told her.

Jeannette caught Phil's arm, the humor softened into seriousness. She said what Willie couldn't. 'Stay until the baby is born.'

'Sure,' Phil said. He took Patti's hand and pulled her up from the table, away from the plundered wedding cake. 'Come on, kid. Let's go dancin'. Me and you. Cut a rug.' Patti was ready for anything. Phil kissed Jeannette's belly in good-bye. They left.

When they were gone, Willie felt bereaved. Phil's false gaiety hurt more than tears. For a moment, the baby stirring inside disrupted the smooth dome of Jeannette's wedding dress, and she put her hand there, to feel it move. 'I love Phil as much as I love you,' Willie said. He didn't say this to hurt her; Jeannette was the only other person on earth who could understand how he felt.

Jeannette rocked herself up from her chair and came to sit on Willie's lap. 'I know,' she said.

'But why? I'm certainly not a homosexual. I don't really have a yen for Italians. I'm crazy about you.'

Jeannette kissed him lightly on the forehead. 'Why does everything have to be explained?'

She was right, of course. Let it be. Willie smiled at her. 'You think Phil is going to sleep with your sister?'

'I don't think he has much choice.'

Willie patted his wife's stomach. It wasn't exactly going to be the wedding night he'd imagined as a kid.

CASSETTE 10, continued

'Patti was a sweet kid,' Phil said. 'Boundless energy. Not directed, like Jeannette's. She was more like one of those geysers in Yellowstone. She just bubbled all the time. And she also had absolutely no idea what the hell was going on. That made it easier somehow.' Phil laughed. 'Patti was definitely Be Here Now.'

'Did you go dancing?'

'Naw. We bypassed the preliminaries. Patti said she really

wanted to see my loft. What she really wanted to see was my waterbed.'

'What happened?'

'We made waves,' Phil said. 'It was kind of weird, loving Jeannette and screwing her sister. But Patti liked it so much, and wanted to do it so often, I didn't have much time or energy for introspection.' He laughed again. 'Patti had real . . . what'd you call it? . . . *Joie de vivre*. Everything was special, important to her. We'd just made love. I was wiped out, but there's Patti, going a mile a minute.

' "You're the first Italian I ever slept with," she says. 'As a matter of fact, you're the first man from New York City I've ever slept with. As a matter of fact, you're the first man who wasn't from the South I ever slept with."

'I felt like a Learning Experience,' Phil said. 'I asked her if it felt any different.

' "It was super. Just glorious. It was wonderful, Phil!" Did I mention that Patti was dynamite for the ego? Anyway, I grabbed her and pulled her over to me. "Let me ask you a question. How many guys have you slept with?"

'Patti giggled. She was a giggler. "Promise not to tell?"

'I nodded.

' "You're the second." That broke me up. "I'm mostly a lot of show," she says. "Jeannette is the wild one. She went through the entire football team her senior term. Oh, she's not *loose*. She's just a little freer than I am."

'I tried to imagine Jeannette banging all those jocks. I didn't know whether to believe Patti or not. I still don't. With Patti, there never was much quiet time for thinking your own thoughts. Now, suddenly, she's all conscience-stricken and upset.

' "Oh, Phil. Do you think that what I've done is incestuous?"

' "No, I don't," I told her. "I'm not your brother." I was just as glad she didn't know about the LSD.'

'She'll know after the movie comes out.'

'I don't think so,' Phil said. 'Patti finally ended up in a Hare Krishna monastery, or whatever they call them. She got a job at the airport renting cars, and they recruited her there. And even if she did see it, which I doubt, it wouldn't matter anymore. There's a statute of limitations on guilt.

'"But you're such good friends with my sister," Patti said.
'"That doesn't make it incest."[2]
'"Are you sure?"
'"For Christ's sake, of course I'm sure."
'"Sure?"
'"Yeah, sure I'm sure."
'"Well, as long as you're sure," Patti said.
'"Yeah. Yeah. I'm sure."
'She grabbed me. "Then let's do it again."[3]
'More waves?' I asked.
'A veritable hurricane,' Phil said.

CHAPTER 23

WILLIE & PHIL
by William Kaufman

As soon as they were married, Jeannette was ready to have the baby. She was sick of being pregnant. It was almost impossible for her to find a comfortable position to fall asleep in, and if she did doze off, the baby or her bladder woke her up again. One night Willie counted eight trips to the bathroom between midnight and seven a.m. She was hot all the time; the connection between her thighs and her pelvis felt wobbly; her ankles were swelling. Even her maternity clothes were tight. She began to dream about small waists, flat stomachs, and naked men.

Together and alone, Willie and Jeannette worried about whether the baby would be healthy and normal. When Willie found a story in the *Times* reporting a tentative connection between LSD use and genetic abnormalities, he cut it out before Jeannette could read it. When Jeannette saw somewhere that caffeine could cause birth defects, she cried for three hours. Several times a day Willie helped Jeannette practice her LaMaze breathing techniques. Most of the rest of the time, he spent reading books about do-it-yourself deliveries, just in case this baby, like Jeannette, didn't want to wait to get to the hospital to be born. He used his Yoga to keep himself cooled out.

They didn't see much of Phil in those weeks after the wedding. Until Patti went home to Kentucky, he spent a lot of time with her. After she left, he spent a lot of time recovering from her visit. But he was on call twenty-four hours a day. Phil had the stopwatch. He had the movie camera. He was going to be the godfather. On top of the list of 'Things to Do When the Times Comes,' it said, 'Call Phil.'

One day Willie came home to find Jeannette on her hands and knees scrubbing the kitchen floor. Her belly almost brushed the ground. 'What's happening?' Willie asked. 'Are you all right?'

Jeannette pushed her bangs out of her eyes and looked up at him. 'I've cleaned the refrigerator. I've washed the windows. I bought a new shower curtain. All the books say you're supposed to get a nesting urge just before the baby comes. I'm nesting.'

'Do you feel anything?' Willie asked.

'Only tired,' she told him.

A week later, as they were eating Willie's vegetarian spaghetti, the first contraction came. Jeannette kept eating. 'Relax. They're supposed to start slow.' About three minutes later, Willie saw her wince. 'Call Phil,' she told him. 'Call the doctor.'

They met Phil on the street and piled into the cab. Phil had his camera on his lap. He was oddly quiet. 'You nervous?' Willie asked him.

Phil was nervous, but not about the baby. 'You both have the right to hate me,' he said. 'Just smash me in the face. I can't keep my hands off other people's women.'

Willie laughed. 'Patti is not other people's women.'

Jeannette started to use her first-level breathing techniques – suck it in, blow it out. Suck it in, blow it out. 'I'm getting close, you guys,' she said between exhalations.

'But she's Jeannette's sister,' Phil said. 'Doesn't that make it kind of incestuous?'

Jeannette stopped breathing long enough to say, 'Dammit, Phil, if you don't shut up, I'm going to have the baby right here in the cab.'

'I guess I'm just an animal,' Phil said.

Willie squeezed Jeannette's hand. 'Are you okay, honey?' He felt powerless to help with either Jeannette's labor or Phil's guilt.

'Remember,' she said. 'Zelda if it's a girl, Webster if it's a boy.'

Willie leaned over the seat. 'What do you think of those names, driver?'

The driver dodged a jaywalker. 'What's the last name?'

'Kaufman.'

'Personally,' the driver said, 'I prefer Debbie and Bill.'

'Poor Zelda or Webster,' Phil said. 'To have a worm like me for a godfather.'

'The kid'll survive it, Phil,' Willie said. 'And so will you.'

CASSETTE 11 Phil D'Amico / Alex Stephens

'You ever been in a fathers' waiting room?' Phil asked me. 'You ever seen Sartre's *No Exit*? They rushed Jeannette off to the labor room and locked Willie and me up in a padded cell for expectant fathers. It was full of stale cigarette smoke. This other poor bastard had been there for hours. He was going nuts.

'Willie sat there doing Yoga breathing, eight in, sixteen out. He sounded like a bellows. "You should try it," he says. "It really cools you out."

'"Ha," I said. "Maybe it works for the dudes in India. But they've been at it for five thousand years."

'Willie put on his New York mystic voice. "It all unfolds the way it's meant to," he says. "What will be, will be."

'It really drove me nuts when he got like that. "Goat shit," I told him. "I shape my own destiny. If I can't, I may as well pack it all in." We'd had this argument before, but it helped to pass the time.

'"I don't want to sound pompous," Willie said, "so I won't say anything like life is a river and we all flow with it and you can't really fight the flow . . . it's too strong . . . so you may as well surrender and just go along with it. I won't say anything like that."

'"Good," I told him. "I'm glad you didn't say anything as horse-manury as that or I'd stroke out right here in the hospital." Right then a nurse comes in. "How is she?" I asked.

'"Very close."

'"Is she all right?" Willie asked.

'"Just fine."

'We thanked her for the report. "What about *my* wife?" the other guy wants to know. The nurse got really snippy. "I

already told you, you have at least another hour or so." The poor bastard was so nervous it was funny. "This is a lot worse than the first kid," he said. "I didn't think I'd be nervous this time, but . . ."

'"This is *our* first time," I told him.

'"Your first kid?"

'"In a manner of speaking, yes."

'Willie kept breathing away. "I must say, I feel very peaceful."

'"You're a nervous wreck," I told him. "But you're covering it with all the Yogi baloney."

'"Yog-*a*,' Willie said. "Your hostility is only a form of love."

'I'm not hostile. I'm just nervous," I said.

'Willie laughed. "I really love you, Gumba." The other guy gave us a very strange look. I decided we might as well make it interesting. "Frankly, I'm crazy about *you*," I said.

'Then Willie decided he needed to get some blood to his brain. He got down on the floor and made a triangle out of his arms. He was gonna do a headstand. I happened to be pretty good at those myself, so I went down with him and up we went. Slowly. Very slowly. By this time, the other guy thinks he's hallucinating.

'"You're a natural, Phil," Willie said.

'"I must say, I'm beginning to see you in a different light."

'We hadn't been upside down too long when this pair of feet walks in, wearing green Baggies. Green pants. Green shirt. Green shower cap. It's the doctor. "Mr. Kaufman?" he says, and Willie and I roll over and sit on the floor.

'"Mrs. Kaufman is fine and you have a healthy baby girl. Six pounds, three ounces."

'We went crazy. Hugged each other. Practically cried. "It's a Zelda! It's a Zelda! Hey, I love you, old friend." If the doctor thought we were weird, he didn't let on. "You can come see Mrs. Kaufman and the baby now." Then we hugged him.

'The other poor guy was dejected. "What about me, doctor?" he says, and the doc smiles at the poor jerk and says, "I don't think I'm your doctor."

'I wondered how he was gonna survive, without us to put on a show for him. Anyhow, I grabbed Willie and the camera, and off we went to meet Zelda.

CHAPTER 24

WILLIE & PHIL
by William Kaufman

Willie started into the room, but Phil held him back. 'Hold it, Morris. I gotta wind the camera.' From inside the room came a tiny cry, almost like the call of a bird. 'Damn,' Phil said. 'I wish I had sound. Okay, now you can go.'

Willie's fears vanished when he saw Jennette, bangs damp, eyes tired, but smiling at them. She was thinner than the last time Willie had seen her, her belly flat under the covers.

'Hi, guys,' she said. 'Look what I got.'

Behind him, Willie heard the camera start to whir as Jeannette pulled back the blanket to show them the bundle in her arms. Zelda was unbelievably small and unbelievably perfect. She grasped Jeannette's thumb with one tiny pink hand. Silently Willie counted fingers . . . one, two, three, four, five. A miracle. Zelda's eyes opened briefly at the noise of their coming; then the lids slid drowsily back down to half-mast. She seemed quite content to be alive.

'Watch this,' Jeannette said. She opened her hospital gown to expose one breast and lightly brushed the baby's cheek with her nipple. Without opening her eyes, Zelda turned toward the nipple and, with Jeannette's help, put it in her tiny mouth. Her little fists clenched tight, and Willie could see her small jaw work at the consuming task of sucking. He had never seen anything more beautiful in his life.

'She's gorgeous,' Phil said. 'I never photographed a more beautiful woman.' He moved in for a close-up of Zelda at her breakfast.

'I s'pose you don't mean me,' Jeannette said.

For almost a year they had the same argument over and over again – Willie the city boy wanting to flee for the country, Jeannette the country girl wanting to stay in the city.

One day in May of 1974, Willie started it again. They were at the laundromat. Jeannette hated the laundromat. All the machines were busy when they arrived; they had to do their wash in endless shifts as the machines emptied. One of the frustrations of city life. As Jeannette pulled their clothes out of the last dryer and Willie folded them and Zelda looked on from her stroller, Willie said, 'Let's move to the country. Let's buy a farm.'

'What'll we live on?'

'We'll grow our own vegetables. We'll make our own bread.'

'Yeah, Willie, but what'll we live on?'

'I'll find work.'

'You're not a farmer.'

True, but not important. Willie decided to fight dirty. He turned to Zelda. 'Poor kid never saw a tree. Zelda, have you ever seen a tree?

Zelda looked up from her string of plastic dishes long enough to say, 'Tree?'

'Willie, you don't know anything about the country.'

'There is no air in this city, Jeannette. I've got to get out.'

Jeannette tossed the sheets at him. 'I ran away from all that stuff.'

'Try it,' Willie pleaded. 'Just try it. If it's no good, we can come back. If not for me, for Zelda. Okay?'

Now Jeannette drew the baby into the debate. 'What do you think, Zelda? Should we try it?'

Zelda, who had recently discovered the powerful delights of 'No,' said, 'No.'

'Please, Zelda. For Daddy Willie.'

Jeannette fished the last of the socks out of the dryer and slammed it shut. 'Okay. Six months.'

'A year,' Willie bargained. 'At least time for our crops to come in.'

Jeannette laughed out loud in the laundromat. 'Our crops. Oh, Willie, you are the funniest man I've ever known.'

Damn right, our crop, Willie thought. 'Oh, I'm just your average itinerant Jewish farmer,' he said, and he was sure he'd be a good one.

'I got letters,' Phil said. 'The first six months, I lived for those letters. I hated it here. I didn't know anybody. You couldn't even bitch about the weather – it was always good. I missed New York. I missed the angst. I missed Willie and Jeannette. Every time I saw a kid in a stroller, I went out and bought a toy for Zelda. Willie started calling me Uncle F.A.O Schwartz.

'I was learning a lot, I guess. At least I'd moved up from dog food to toothpaste and soft drinks. I was making class commercials. I'd try to find out when they were scheduled to run one of my spots on the network, so Willie and Jeannette could go to Macy's TV department and watch it. They didn't have a set, and they couldn't take Zelda to a bar, so they went to Macy's.

'One time the clerk came up to Jeannette in the middle of a feminine-deodorant-spray spot I'd done – it was real nice, quiet, soft-focus, the whole thing – and said, "Hey, lady, you gonna buy something or not?"

' "Shhh," Jeannette told him. "My friend made that spot."

' "Yeah, which one is she?" the guy asks.

' "My friend isn't *in* it," Jeannette says. "He *made* it." She rolled the stroller up close so Zelda could see. "Look, honey girl. That's your uncle Phil's commercial."

'By this time, the guy's watching, too. He catches on to what the product is and gets real upset. "Lady, you shouldn't let a little kid watch stuff like that."

' "Watch it?" Jeannette says. "Are you kidding? She uses it." After that, they went to Gimbels to watch TV.

'Willie wrote a lot. He was on his Henry David Thoreau Kaufman trip. He wanted to move out of the city and do subsistence farming. In a weak moment, Jeannette agreed to give it a try.

They found this place in the Catskills and Willie put everything he had into it. He said it was paradise. Jeannette said it was a dump. They packed up the VW, rented a U-Haul, and moved. Good-bye, New York. Hello, Nature. Willie's letters started to sound like a cross between a seed catalog and *The Farmer's Almanac*. They got chickens. He planted corn. He planted strawberries, he planted beans, he planted zucchini. The

zucchini really went crazy. They ate it all winter. Jeannette sent me zucchini bread for my birthday.

'It was funny,' Phil said. 'I was working my ass off and getting rich. Willie was working his off and getting poor.'

CHAPTER 26

WILLIE & PHIL
by William Kaufman

Despite Jeannette's skepticism, Willie's crops *did* come up. The chickens *did* lay eggs. Life *was* beautiful. Zelda liked the country. She watched grasshoppers and ants. She ate grass. She talked to the chickens. Willie loved the country. He loved watching what he'd planted grow. He loved working with his hands and keeping his mouth shut. He grew a beard and got a good tan, digging in his fields. Jeannette planted a flower garden and did what she could with the house. Between the baby and the violin, she seemed happy enough.

Willie's corn was knee-high by the Fourth of July. By August, when his parents came to visit, it was taller than a man. Willie was hoeing when their Oldsmobile came in sight, raising a huge cloud of dust. Jeannette, on the porch, was playing Mozart. Willie captured Zelda in her wanderings and picked her up. 'Look, here comes Grandma.'

Grandma climbed out into the dust. 'It's like Tobacco Road here.'

'Hi, folks,' Willie said.

Willie's father lunged for Zelda. 'Hello, Willie. Let me see my baby.' Zelda flinched. She hadn't seen anybody but Willie, Jeannette and the chickens for quite a while. Her grandparents she greeted with suspicion. Jeannette put down the violin to kiss her in-laws. Mrs. Kaufman hugged Willie, then pulled away. 'You need a bath.'

'We don't have a bath,' Jeannette said.

Willie watched his mother's eyebrows surge with disapproval. She looked around quickly, taking it all in. 'You still have the meshugina bird,[1]

'You look fine, mom,' Willie said.

His mother reached for Zelda. 'Let me see my little sweetheart.' Zelda squirmed in her embrace. 'What a trip we had!'

Willie's father wiped his brow. 'I took a wrong turn at Woodstock.'

'That's easy to do,' Willie said.

Jeannette defected, under the guise of hospitality. She went in the house for lemonade. Willie's mother turned all guiltily innocent. 'Oh, by the way, Willie, we brought a few things. Harry, give him the stuff.'

For the first time, Willie looked into the car. 'A few things' translated into a year's supply of canned goods and half of Bloomingdale's kiddies' department. Willie groaned. 'Oh, this is too much.'

His mother had anticipated his protests; she had her speech ready. 'Please don't make any jokes, Willie. Since we figured you're starving, we brought supplies. I don't mind *you* looking like Mahatma Gandhi, but I won't let my grandchild starve.'

Willie sighed. The stuff was there. They'd have to keep it. But he wasn't going to accept his parent's charity, however well-intentioned, without registering his moral reservations. 'Zelda's not starving, Mom. She eats better than you do.'

Willie's mother was ready for him. She'd been reading women's magazines again. 'Does she eat protein? Please, Willie, no arguments. A child needs protein.'

Willie'd done some reading of his own. Adelle Davis vs. *Woman's Day*. 'There's protein in vegetables. There's protein in fruit.'

Jeannette came back with the lemonade. Both sides looked to her for support. 'Jeannette, is he sound of mind?'

But Jeannette chose to remain neutral. She shrugged. 'You raised a mystic, Mrs. Kaufman.'

'It's because he was an only child. When will you call me Momma? Mother? Anything but Mrs. Kaufman.'

'Okay, Mom,' Jeannette said.

Willie found he preferred 'Mrs. Kaufman'. He had the feeling his mother and his wife were ganging up on him. Willie's father reached for the lemonade and drank. 'Taste this. Delicious. The real homemade stuff.'

Blessed are the peacemakers, Willie thought.

'It's frozen,' Jeannette said.

That hurt. It not only made Willie look like a hypocrite, it made his father look like a fool. 'You can't grow lemons in this climate,' Willie explained.

'What can you grow here except a beard?' his mother said.

When he was younger and lived at home, Willie used to rise to the bait. His mother thrived on argument; it made her feel alive. His father favored peace at any price. Now, hearing the warning signs, he sidled off the porch and began to explore the yard. Willie looked for middle ground. 'Mom, Pop,' he said, 'I'm glad you're here. In fact, I'm happy. But let's not judge each other. This is *our* journey. We're not asking you to take it. Just enjoy us. Let's enjoy each other, okay?'

His mother considered, then softened. 'All right, Willie. You're absolutely right. This is your journey. And you've given us a beautiful grandchild. So I'm happy, too. Besides, who am I to judge someone else's journey?'

Hostilities averted. A diplomatic victory. Jeannette laughed. Willie laughed. As soon as she decided they weren't laughing at her, Willie's mother laughed with them. Zelda could never resist a good laugh; once you got her started, she was good for half an hour. Even the bird tried to laugh. Everything was going to be okay. Just so long as Willie's father, who was heading for the cornfield, didn't recognize marijuana plants when he saw them.

If he noticed a strange weed in Willie's weedless garden, Harry Kaufman didn't say a word. 'You've got a green thumb, Willie,' he told his son.

CHAPTER 27

For the first time, Willie found winter beautiful. In the city, it had always been at best an inconvenience, at worst, a severe depressant, watching the same snow age from gray to black, going back and forth, back and forth from a liquid to a solid state, always, for months, an impediment to human travel, a colloidal suspension of candy wrappers and dog shit that grew denser and denser the closer spring came. Here, in the country, winter was endless subtle variations on the theme of white. It was peace. It was silence, relieved only by the small winter music of pinging icicles, boots crunching the snow crust, a plaintive wind that sometimes rose at night.

Their house was sound. The fire kept them warm. Jeannette made music on the violin. Zelda amused them. They were each other's company. The only thing Willie missed from city life was his piano. By way of cottage industry, he bought a loom. The loom kept his fingers busy, and after he got the hang of weaving, it became so routine his mind was free to travel elsewhere. Life was as close to perfect as he figured it could get. It even began to look as if they could survive financially. As he wove, he figured expenses versus profits in his head.

'I figure if I can make two ponchos a week we'll have almost fifty by summer,' he told Jeannette. 'And I think we can get about thirty dollars apiece for them. Which would give us a profit of about a thousand dollars. If the crops come in, we'll have enough to get through the summer.'

In response to this good news, Zelda began to cry. Jeannette put down her violin and hefted Zelda out of her playpen and carried her to the counter where her diapers got changed. This happened often. Willie didn't break his rhythm at the loom. Not until Jeannette, with two diaper pins in her mouth, said, 'I won't be here.'

Back and forth, back and forth, Willie worked the shuttle. He only half-heard Jeannette and didn't understand. 'What?'

'I said I won't be here.'

Willie stopped weaving. 'You said you'd give it a year.'

Jeannette powdered the baby's bottom. 'I'm taking Zelda.'

Willie felt as though she'd kicked him. 'You're not taking my kid anywhere.'

Zelda, who loved to be changed, obligingly rolled back on her buttocks and raised her legs as Jeannette slid a fresh diaper under her. 'Oh, yes I am.'

Willie began to believe her. It made him feel helpless. 'Where?' he asked.

Jeannette jammed the pins through the diaper and snapped them shut, first one side, then the other. 'Anywhere there are some people.'

There was a spot of talcum powder on her sweater. Her hair was messy and her eyes were sad. With one hand, slowly she stroked the baby's hair. Why hadn't he noticed her sadness before? 'Do I bore you?' Willie asked.

'I hate my life,' Jeannette said. She lifted the baby down and deposited her in the playpen.

Willie got up from the loom and went to her. 'I guess I'm all ego. *My* trip. *My* fantasies. Pushing too hard to find the answer.'

'There are no answers, Willie.' She sounded tired, but resolved.

We're not fighting, Willie thought. This is beyond fighting. He ached for Jeannette and wanted more than anything to comfort her, to make her smile. He put his arms around her, but she was stiff inside them and turned away from his kiss. Willie felt a terrible sadness, a sense of loss. He had only himself to blame. 'Do you hate me?' he asked.

'No, Willie. I'm just really tired of feeling sad all the time.'

Willie's mind raced ahead. The country interlude was over. He would miss it. 'I really wanted to see my strawberries come in,' he said.

'You're free to stay, if you want to,' Jeannette said, and her detachment hurt even more than her unhappiness.

'I get the feeling you don't really care what I do.'

'That's not true.'

Willie wanted to believe her. She was more important to him

then than any trip. He felt almost shy with her. 'Do you want me to go with you?'

'Would you be willing to do that?' she asked.

Willie smiled, relieved, heartened. It didn't have to be goodbye. It wasn't him Jeannette couldn't stand. 'It's my destiny,' he told her.

'Are you sure, Willie?'

Willie kissed Jeannette. He was sure. To his profound relief, she kissed him back, then pulled away a little to look into his eyes. 'I never want you to say I made you leave.'

Silently Willie promised himself never to reproach her. He kissed Jeannette again, and realized it had been a long time since he kissed her. Willie wondered how he'd managed to forget how pleasurable it was. She kissed him freely now, and he responded with his whole body. He laughed with happiness. 'I think I'm getting a hard-on.' He took Jeannette's hand and led her to the couch. They sat close, watching the fire. Willie knew they would make love.

'Well, where are we gonna go?' Jeannette asked him. Willie said the first thing that came into his head. 'To see Phil.' He turned to Zelda in her playpen, happily forgotten for a while. 'Hey, kid. You want to go see your uncle Phil?'

Zelda, who was still in her professionally negative phase, said, 'No.'

But they went anyway.

CASSETTE 12 Phil D'Amico/ Alex Stephens

'They got out here a couple of days before Christmas. Drove straight through. I had a house on the beach at Malibu at the time. A very funky place. I was in the hot tub, relaxing, when they pulled in. It was terrific to see them, especially since I felt I'd really gotten my shit together. I was telling them how much I hated L.A. that whole first year, when Big Rena comes strolling out with the pound of Acapulco Gold I'd just picked up.'

'Wait a minute,' I said. 'Who's big Rena? Have we seen her before?'

'Ah, Rena.' Phil sighs. 'Rena was the prize in the California Cracker Jack. What a body! She was as fantastic as the house. And very easy to live with. Rena was a real free spirit. So she comes out with the grass and says, "I'll make us a number, Poppa."

'"Love you, Momma," I said. We were always saying stuff like that. Rena was in a bikini. She was *made* to be in a bikini. So she sits down on a deck chair and starts to roll a Rena special. She used to lick three long papers together and roll a joint as fat as a cigar. Willie's eyes almost came out of his head. I was glad to see going back to the land hadn't hurt his hormones any. Jeannette looked like she was reserving judgment. I'm still catching them up on the life and times of Phil D'Amico. "The next thing you know, I'm taking tennis lessons."

'"You?" Willie says.

'"I thought of you both a hundred times. I figured you'd laugh. Phil D'Amico in his white tennis shorts, learning how to serve and volley. But I dug it. I dug it." By this time, the joint's going around. Willie and Jeannette have been subsisting on New York home-grown. A few tokes of the Gold, and they're ripped. "And then I met Big Rena." She came over to the hot

tub and gave me a big sloppy kiss. "This child taught me how to live. Talk about Be Here Now. I was nowhere."

'"He was a worrywart," Rena says.

'"Now every day is a joy," I tell them. I guess I sounded like Esalen via Rena. Anyway, I was feeling pretty good about myself. And I wanted Jeannette to know it. Not spite, you know. I figured it would make her happy. I climbed out of the hot tub and put on my robe. Zelda's staring at me like I'm the Sheikh of Araby. I went over and gave her a squeeze, picked her up. "Hey, kid, you're going to get to know your uncle Phil. We're gonna teach you how to swim and get some color on your bones."

'She was a beautiful kid. But she didn't know what to make of me. They'd had her out in the boondocks so long, she thought Willie and Jeannette were the only two people on earth. So we all went down to the beach, except Rena. She stayed to answer the phone. Willie and Jeannette couldn't get over the Christmas lights ... broad daylight, seventy-five degrees, the Pacific Ocean, and we're all waiting for Santa Claus.

'Willie was looking sort of, well, bemused. Like he didn't belong in my neighborhood anymore. His jeans'd been patched about seventy times, and I figured he hadn't exactly been cleaning up, weaving ponchos in the Catskills. I didn't want him to have to worry about bread. I'm pulling in two hundred thou a year, and my best friend looks like he hasn't eaten for a couple of weeks. So I say, "You got no money problems, hear? You can stay with me for a year. *Mi casa es tu casa.*" Got it right out in the open.

'Willie didn't argue. He just said thanks. I put my arms around them both and we walked along the water. I can't tell you how great I felt. I love the ocean, but I'm not one of these moody introspective types. It was fantastic to be there with my friends. "Maybe it's the grass talking," I said, "but I love you both so much I want to cry."

'Jeannette gave me a little hug and said, "Oh, Phil, we missed you."

'I was so high I couldn't believe it. Just laughed and laughed. "Look at us, Willie and Phil and Jeannette on the beach at Malibu. Ooowee." I ran down to the water, about to run right in, but then I spotted one of our local celebrities out for a stroll and I figured I gotta tell them. I'm feeling like the Malibu

Chamber of Commerce. "Quick! See that chick in the blue shorts?"

'"Over there?" Jeannette says.

'"You see her, Willie?"

'"I see her."

'"Natalie Wood!" They dug it. I tell you, it was beautiful to be together again,' Phil said.

CHAPTER 29

WILLIE & PHIL
by William Kaufman

'Are you sure this is the place?' Willie asked Jeannette. She checked the address on her notepad.

'This is it. He said it was a nice place.'

'There's nice and nice,' Willie said. 'Can you picture Phil in a place like this?'

'There's two cars,' Jeannette said. 'Maybe he's got a roommate to help with the rent.'

Willie parked the Volkswagen and the three of them climbed out and stretched their legs. They could hear the ocean. The air smelled of it. 'I don't believe it,' Willie said.

Zelda believed. She chugged right up to the carved door and tugged at the big brass knob. 'Maybe he's not home,' Willie said.

'He said on the phone he'd leave the door unlocked,' Jeannette said. She tried the knob, and the door opened. Phil's living room was opulent and funky. His decorator would have bombed in Flatbush. The place smelled of money, from the exposed staircase to the fireplace, from the rafters to the springy rugs. The fourth wall was glass and fronted on the beach. Zelda dived for it, and Jeannette ran after her from going straight through. It was then she discovered Phil, out on the deck, reclining in his hot tub like some Oriental potentate. One of the windows was a door.

'Hey, Gumba,' Willie said.

'Goo-*bah*!' Zelda echoed.

Jeannette said, 'Hi, Phil.'

Phil turned in his tub. 'Hey, Morris. Jeannette. Hiya, Zelda. How do you like my house, huh?'

'It's beautiful, Phil,' Jeannette said.

'You guys wanna join me? The water's fine.'

They declined. The deck of Phil's house was bigger than their cabin in the Catskills. On one corner, a giant evergreen was dripping artifical snow in the sunshine, glittering with small lights and large glass balls. Presents were piled high under its lowest boughs.

'How was your trip?' Phil asked.

'Long,' Willie said.

'Hard,' Jeannette said. 'We drove like hell to get here, Phil.'

'Listen, there's lots of room inside if you guys wanna freshen up or anything. Jeannette?'

'I'd rather sit, thanks.'

Phil looked tan and healthy. Jeannette, in contrast, seemed tired and pale. Willie wondered why he hadn't noticed before. California would be good for her. It seemed funny to have Phil in one place, not pacing up and down Willie was used to swiveling his head when he talked to him. 'You seem to have cooled out,' he said.

'It comes from going with the flow, my man.'

'Do you meditate?'

'Only in the Jacuzzi. Seriously, how do you like L.A.?' Phil asked.

'It's very flat,' Willie said.

'We just got here,' Jeannette said.

Zelda rooted around under the Christmas tree, examining the brightly wrapped packages.

'The first year, I hated it,' Phil said. 'Fuckin' graveyard. No people. Only cars. Sun almost stroked me out. I was on the verge of coming home every other day.'

Phil had changed somehow, solidified. There was a sense of substance behind his brashness. He held forth easily, about his work, his tennis lessons, his new Enlightenment. Money, Willie wondered, or something else? Phil attributed his contentment to Rena, a very young, very blonde, very well-stacked woman who rolled the most generous joints Willie'd ever seen. Great dope, too. On a regular diet of stuff like that, anyone with a mind left would find it at peace.

Still, Willie was uneasy. Amid Phil's luxuries, he missed his strawberries, his corn and beans, the deep snow and the dark responsive dirt in his fields. Life at subsistence level had a clear

focus, choices had a purpose, the simplicity of it soothed a questioning mind. They walked on the beach, but the ocean had never been Willie's symbol of freedom.

'You got no money problems,' Phil told him. 'Hear?'

What Willie heard was all the old questions, asking themselves again. One dream down. What in hell, he thought, was he going to find to replace it?

Jeannette looked happy. Phil looked happy. Even Zelda, tottering forward on her new walker's legs, looked happy. His family, his friends, his beloved encumbrances. If I'm not happy, Willie thought, it must be my own damn fault.

Phil pointed wildly at a woman down the beach. 'See her? You see her? That's Natalie Wood.'

Phil was very excited. Because he loved him, and didn't want to disappoint him, Willie pretended to be excited, too.

Welcome back to the real world, kid, he told himself. And Merry Christmas.

CASSETTE 12 Phil D'Amico/ Alex Stephens

'Jeannette went to work for me,' Phil said. 'I was getting a lot of work then, more than I could handle, and I needed the third person in the editing room. Jeannette was the best. Boy, did she learn fast. In no time I was trusting her to do the rough cuts on all my spots. A sharp lady, Jeannette. Ambitious, too. She was beginning to get it that she could really make something of herself. And she loved to edit film. Great sense of timing.'

'Where were you working then?' I asked.

'For myself. After I got out here, I started finding out how good I really was. After a while, I realized the group I was working with was taking too big a piece of my action for what I was getting back. So I went on my own.

'It worked. I was getting car clients, beer clients, once in a while an insurance company or a political candidate. I had a gorgeous office and a beautiful editing room. An eight-plate KEM, besides the benches. And a sweet little sound studio, too. Sixteen in, four out on the board. A soundproof booth. The whole thing. Nicely decorated, too. The studios look like dungeons in comparison. And people. What a team I put together. We worked hard, we played hard. It was a good time,' Phil said.

'A high-overhead time, it sounds like.'

'That was part of the beauty of it,' Phil said. 'Sure I had debts. But they kept the tax bill down. And I was working for myself. It was like a fairy tale. Brooklyn boy makes good.'

'How did Rena and Jeannette get along?' I asked. 'Any jealousy there?'

'Rena split,' Phil said. 'But not because of Jeannette. Rena was a butterfly, you know? She wanted to play all the time, walk on the beach, get stoned, make love. Oh, she liked the Malibu view and the hot tub and all the goodies, but she didn't

like the fact I had to work to get them. She called me a filthy materialist.' Phil laughed. 'I'll tell you a secret about Rena. Her daddy's in oil. She was born with an Exxon credit card in her mouth. Rena could be righteous about materialism because she never had to work a day in her sweet young life. Also, she never understood that I *liked* my work. That it brought in the bucks was a secondary.' Again Phil laughed. 'Now I'm trying to sound better than I am. Not secondary. Let's say equal. And let's get something else straight. I never touched Jeannette. We worked together, we had a good time together, but she was Willie's wife. We never got it on that whole . . . what? . . . year, year and a half.'

'Were you still in love with her?' I asked.

'Sure,' Phil said. 'I'd been in love with her six years by then. It was getting to be a habit. So?'

'It must have been hard.'

'Life is hard,' Phil said.

'And Willie?'

'Ah, Willie.'

'What was Willie doing? Did he get another teaching job?'

'Willie stayed home and looked after the kid,' Phil said.

CHAPTER 32

WILLIE & PHIL
by William Kaufman

Willie Kaufman, house husband. Macrobiotic cook. Childcare specialist. Seeker. Student. Apprentice mystic. Someone else's list might be shorter: Willie Kaufman, failure. But Willie didn't feel like a failure. He hadn't given up. He was pretty sure he'd gotten waylaid on the road to Nirvana, but he still cherished the hope of getting there someday. Willie was only twenty-eight. Nobody's supposed to have all the answers at twenty-eight.

He loved Jeannette. He loved Phil. He kept telling himself that. And they were good to him. They stayed off his back and out of his head. They were friends, right? Actually, Willie's best friend those days was his daughter, Zelda. Zelda was three years old, a very good age. Zelda was smart. Zelda was pretty. Zelda had a good imagination and a sense of humor. And Zelda, like Willie, made no money and wielded no power in this world. They played games and fed the bird and kept the little Venice apartment clean and made dinner for Mommy when she came home at night.

Such a deal, Willie thought.

Zelda was the ideal companion. He could talk to her about anything. She never laughed at him except when he tickled her or made faces, never told him he was crazy for looking for answers that didn't exist and wouldn't help if they did. She never told him he was wasting his time or ought to get a job. She was always ready to take a walk or go for a ride or have an adventure. She was never too tired or too busy for him. And Willie could always make her happy. He liked to make Zelda happy.

Willie Kaufman was slowly going nuts.

In the afternoon, after Zelda's nap and before Jeannette came home, Willie and Zelda often went for a ride on their bike. Their favorite route went along near Muscle Beach, where they could watch the weightlifters and the old folks and the hippies watching them, and feel at home. Willie liked to think out loud as he pedaled.

One day Willie was thinking about reincarnation. To come back as a seagull, he decided, would be an excellent fate. He shared this thought with Zelda, behind him in her kiddie seat. 'Can you imagine being a seagull?' he asked her. 'You wouldn't have to pay for airplane tickets. If you wanted to go to Miami all you'd have to do is get up in the morning and fly there.'

Zelda paid no attention to him. She was making up a song as she went along, improvising the way Willie used to do on the piano. She kept time on Willie's back.

'And if you were hungry,' Willie said, 'all you'd have to do is flap over the water and find some nice clean garbage to eat. Do you want to be a seagull?'

Zelda apparently failed to see the advantages of being reincarnated as a seagull. She went on humming.

'I know,' Willie said. 'Maybe we could come back as Pussycats. Then we could purr and lick ourselves.'

Success. Willie heard purring behind him. He turned to see that Zelda wasn't waiting for the next life to be a pussycat; she was licking her shoulder, catlike, in the here and now. 'Good kitty,' Willie said. When he turned back to the path, he spotted Rena, adding her estimable attractions to a park bench. Willie hailed her.

'Hi, Willie. Hello, Zelda.' Rena seemed glad to see them. To Willie, she looked different somehow. He couldn't quite put his finger on what it was, maybe only that she was wearing more clothes and less of her showed. 'We haven't seen you for a long time, Rena.'

'I've been getting my act together,' Rena said. 'How's Phil?'

Willie found himself feeling a little hostile toward Rena and her act, her California tan, the blonde perfection and perfect earnestness. 'Mr. Hollywood? He's getting very rich.'

'He's a very sweet man,' Rena said, 'but the money thing was like an obsession with him.'

Well said, Rena, Willie thought. Your shrink would be proud

of you. 'That's true,' Willie said. 'How true. And how are you?' Willie took the opportunity to look her up and down. Was it possible he felt something stirring besides hostility?

'Terrific. I'm going to Maui. Some friends of mine started a commune. Really beautiful people.'

Willie pictured a commune full of women as beautiful as Rena. It made his groin ache. Zelda, he noticed, had picked up her song again. You could do worse than Rena, Willie thought, if you could handle all the mental-health clichés. 'Grow their own food? Live off the land? That sort of thing?'

Rena pushed her blonde hair back off her forehead with a well-tanned hand. 'There's just so much *aggression* in L.A., you know?'

'That's true. That's why I'm going to be a seagull.'

'Terrific,' Rena said. 'Then you can fly to Maui.'

Willie took that for an invitation. He was ready to start right away.

'Say hello to Jeannette for me,' Rena said. She patted Zelda's cheek. " 'Bye, sweetheart.' She walked away from them, blonde hair swinging over her gorgeous ass.

Goddamn, Willie wanted to fly. He needed to. He tightened his shoulder blades, flexed his back. It would take powerful muscles to get all the way to Maui. 'Come on, Zelda. Let's fly. Let's flap our wings.' He pumped the air with his arms. Zelda caught on fast. The kid was as crazy as he was. She flapped her wings all the way home.

CHAPTER 33

Willie spent a month in yo-yoville. Up, down. Love, hate. Happy, sad. Some days he thought his life was fine, that he could survive it. Other days, most days, he just wanted to jump the first headwind for Hawaii. For a while, he hoped he could talk Jeannette into sharing his flight, but it was a futile effort. She was happy in L.A.

'Listen, Jeannette. It doesn't snow on Maui. And there are people. It's a commune, for God's sake. Besides, you look great in a bikini.'

Jeannette shook her head. 'Willie, I wish you'd talk this over with Phil,' she said. So Phil came over to dinner. Willie made them an avocado salad. They were as stiff at dinner as refugees from a wax museum. Finally Willie decided it was time to break the ice.

'I guess you know why you're here, Phil. You're supposed to talk me out of my Hawaiian holiday.'

Jeannette put down her fork. 'Willie, I don't *want* to go to Maui.'

Phil was more genial. 'You'd go nuts in two weeks, kid. It's a retirement village for old hippies.'

Phil sounded like Willie's mother. It was the old I-know-better-than-you-do, it's-for-your-own-good tone. 'Maybe I'm just an old hippie,' Willie said.

Jeannette was eating again. She looked at Willie with a conspicuous lack of warmth. 'You're feeling very sorry for yourself.'

'It's a Jewish tradition,' Willie said. Me against them. He was drawing his lines of defense.

'You need a job, Gumba,' Phil, the fountain of wisdom, spouted.

There's nothing, Willie thought, like an Italian Catholic with a bad case of the Protestant work ethic. Willie assaulted a de-

fenseless wedge of avocado with his fork. 'Why do I feel myself feeling hostile all the time? Not just to this ridiculous excuse for a city, but even to you, the both of you?'

It was basically a rhetorical question. Unfortunately, Phil was still playing the Answer Man. 'A little hostility is a healthy thing,' he said.

'Phil, I truly hate that cliché.'

Phil got as red as the red in the Italian flag. Willie could almost hear him thinking another ready-made phrase. No more Mr. Nice Guy. 'How about a good old-fashioned "Go fuck yourself"?'

Willie's tension crystallized. 'Now you're talking. Fuck you. Let's get into it.'

Phil backed off. 'Let me find you a job. You start bringing home the bacon, you'll feel like a million bucks, for Chris-sake.'

Willie wasn't going to do anything for Christ's sake. 'Bringing home the bacon? Feel like a million bucks? *Oy vey is meir!*'

Finally Jeannette spoke up on her own behalf. 'I don't want any more of those endless forty-eight-hour days, all right? I won't.'

Willie's anger passed. It left him sad. 'I understand. I truly do.' He looked at Jeannette, his wife, his friend, the mother of his child, and felt his love for her. 'You are an extremely rare and beautiful being.' He looked at Phil, friend, brother, and lately, benefactor. Willie loved him, too. 'And you are in reality a saint disguised as an Italian Alfred Hitchcock.'

Jeannette reached out to touch his arm. 'Willie . . .'

But Willie wasn't through. From his place on the wall, Meher Baba beamed at him. Don't worry. Be happy. Willie smiled back at his smiling face. 'Look, dear friends. Either I'm having a nervous breakdown or I'm on the verge of a very important discovery. Either way, Willie has to go away. As they say in the jargon, Willie has to find his own space for a while.'

Phil looked Willie kindly in the eye. 'Morris, I love you. You know that. That's why I want to give you the number of this shrink—'

'No, thanks.'

'His name is Murray. He's a very nice fellow . . .'

I have this problem, Murray. I was born. Psychiatry, Willie thought, was designed to grind out well-adjusted neurotics like

Phil. God spare me from feeling like a million bucks. 'Look,' Willie said, 'I made a vow when I was bar-mitzvahed that I would neither seek nor accept psychiatric help.'

'Just one session,' Phil wheedled.

No session, meatball. Willie is ready to fly. For the first time in my life, Willie thought it would be possible to punch Phil in the face, and enjoy it. Jeannette picked up the salad greens, her face carefully neutral. It was painfully clear that she'd learned to put herself first. It was time for Willie to follow her lead. 'I'm getting hostile again,' he said. In warning. In explanation. In fear.

Willie heard a door open softly, the sound of small bare feet on the bare wood floor. Soon Zelda stood in the doorway in her yellow nightgown, tousled, her eyes big from sleep and blinking in the sudden light. She padded to her daddy and snuggled warm against him. Willie pulled her close. 'Hey, pussycat.'

Phil watched them. 'Whatever happened to "Our destinies are interlocked forever"?' he asked.

Willie squeezed his sleepy daughter and was filled again with love for all of them. He smiled at Phil. 'Oh, they are. They are.' Zelda stirred against him, requesting her favorite play. Willie curled his tongue and purred softly. 'Nice pussycat. Good kitty.' Zelda petted his knee. Her pink tongue licked her little wrist. She purred. Willie saw Jeannette's face and Phil's, perplexed and disapproving. It made him sad that they refused to know the pleasure of being pussycats, too. He held Zelda closer and let them go. He purred and purred.

CASSETTE 13 Phil D'Amico/ Alex Stephens

'So Willie goes off to Hawaii,' Phil said. 'There wasn't a goddamn thing we could do to stop him. His mind, what there was of it at that point, was made up. Bye-bye, Willie. The kid took it pretty hard. And Jeannette was pretty lonely out there in Venice She was never there enough to make any friends or anything, you know?

'Zelda needed a daddy. Jeannette needed a man. Murray, my shrink, insisted that it was what I'd secretly wanted to happen all along. We did the only sensible thing. We consolidated our households.'

I whistled. 'I bet *that* made you feel guilty.'

'No!' Phil barked. Then, more softly, he said, 'Well, sure. What do you think? Of course I felt guilty. But on the other hand, what about a guy who packs up and leaves his wife and kid for some hippie-heaven commune in Hawaii? That's not exactly what I call responsible behavior.'

'No,' I agreed. 'On the other hand, it sounds like you and Jeannette sort of drove him to it.'

'Drove him to it? Oh, brother. I don't think you understand what was going on. Willie didn't do a goddamn thing for almost two years except putter around the house, read the Upanishads, and play pussycat with the kid. Jeannette supported him. We never hassled him. We respected his trip, right? That's okay, Willie. You don't feel like working, don't work. You want to throw the I Ching and contemplate your navel all day? Fine.'

'Yeah, but listen to yourself. You obviously despised him for it. You patronized him.'

Phil's voice got very angry. The words came fast. 'And who are you to start passing judgment, huh? This is a story, not a morality play. I didn't hire you to be fucking judgmental. I

wanna be judged, I can go to confession. And it's free.'

'Okay. I'm sorry, Phil.'

'Sorry?' Phil said 'Sorry is irrelevant. I sit here day after day pouring out my heart. Trying to be honest, because I'll tell you something, this movie is nowhere if it isn't honest. I don't need judgments from a total stranger. What do I know about you, anyway?'

'What would you like to know?'

Phil sighed. 'Nothing. It doesn't matter.'

I sighed.

'Look, kid,' Phil said. 'You're a nice person, okay? You write a good screenplay, we'll all be happy.'

'Right,' I said. 'Just don't think while you're doing it. And don't feel. Be a good little machine.'

'You can think and feel all you want to. On your own time.' Phil laughed. 'Look, I know this is a crazy way to work. I know I get pretty intense. But this stuff is very important to me. And I guess I do still feel sort of guilty about some things . . . Listen, there's some leftover lasagna in the refrigerator. Nina makes dynamite lasagna. Why don't I heat it up? You can tell me your life story while we eat. In fifty words or less. Okay?'

'Okay,' I said.

CASSETTE 13, continued

'You feel better now?' Phil asked.

'Yeah. The lasagna was good.'

'You have a very interesting life story.'

'Same old stuff,' I said. 'Interesting to me.'

'It's hard to believe you were married to such a bastard,' Phil said.

'Just lucky, I guess. Let's get back to work. Tell me how you got along with Zelda.'

'Good,' Phil said. 'Not as good as Willie, but good. She called me Uncle Phil Daddy. She loved me, you know, but not like Willie. I wasn't so good at making up stories or pretending to be a penguin. I was working hard,' Phil said. 'I didn't have the time.' A pause on the tape. 'It never really bothered me too much, Willie and me both loving Jeannette. Both making love to her. I never felt like it was a contest. With Zelda, it was

different. I wanted her to like me as much as him. I asked her all the time if she loved me.'

'What did she say?'

'She said, "Yeah." That was the best I could get out of her. Willie's a couple of thousand miles away, and she still loves him the best. It's the blood thing, I'm convinced. Thicker than water and all that. I understand better, now that I've got a kid of my own. I'd kill myself if he liked some other guy better than me.

'Anyway, moving right along, one day we get this letter from Willie. We're headed for work, gonna drop Zelda off at day-care on the way. Jeannette wants to read Willie's letter to the kid. "Do you think that's smart?" I say.

' "No secrets, Phil. Here goes." The letter sounds just like Willie. "Dear Family, I was glad to hear that you're all together now. You're all beautiful people and it was inevitable that what has happened would happen. Don't feel guilty, Gumba. Your destiny has always been to please women. Jeannette, you are my wife, my mother, and my sister. I love you, Zelda."

'Jeannette stopped reading to show Zelda her name. "You are my pussycat," Willie went on. "I hope you are purring all the time. As I told you, friends, Maui was getting complicated. A lot of sex, drugs, and guavas. So I have come to India."

'Do you believe that?' Phil said. 'Willie finally made it to India. And left me with his wife and kid.'

'How did you feel about that?'

'Fine,' Phil said. 'It was okay with me. I figured it was my turn, so to speak. The other side of the coin. I just hoped he'd be okay.'

'How did Zelda take that news?'

'She wanted to know if there were any cowboys in India,' Phil said.

CHAPTER 35

WILLIE & PHIL
by William Kaufman

There were three ways to get to the commune on Maui. You could go by boat, you could go by seaplane, or you could backpack in. It was two hours by foot. Willie had a good set of blisters by the time he arrived, but when he got there, he took his shoes off for good, and didn't even look at them until he left again. The same with his clothes. The commune was so remote, the climate so endlessly hospitable, that no one bothered to wear any. The sight of Big Rena and her beautiful friends unclad was a powerful stimulant, but Willie soon found that with the help of frequent meditation and large quantities of the commune's superb cannabis crop, it was possible to get an erection only when it would be put to good use.

It was a paradisical existence. The communards lived in a series of shallow tidal caves. The water was as warm there as Willie could ever get from his New York taps in winter. Fruits and nuts were plentiful and required a minimum of cultivation. The only expense to staying continually and happily stoned was the price of EZ Widers. Sex was abundant and happened without shame or guilt. Big Rena was an excellent partner. She made Willie feel like a man again.

But, Willie discovered, people are the same everywhere. Ever since Eve partook of the big pineapple, paradise has had its problems. The serpent in the Maui garden was a case of clap imported from Honolulu. Apart from the hassle and discomfort, it gave people a way of keeping score. Tempers shortened. Recriminations flared. Eden turned into another T-group, and Willie found it impossible to pursue the spiritual life there

any longer. His old dream of visiting India revived. Willie put his jeans back on and split. He worked the pineapple harvest long enough to replenish his cash supply, then bought a one-way ticket on a tramp steamer bound for India.

In Banaras, Willie bathed in the Ganges. He was not alone. The river was as crowded as the Catskills on Labor Day, as closely packed as the rush-hour IRT, except that nobody shoved him or swore at him or tried to mug him. There was a generally benevolent spirit among the vertical bathers. If Willie's body didn't get any too clean in the sacred river, at least his spirit was refreshed by the bath.

From Banaras Willie went to Calcutta. In his dreams, India had been a green land full of happy people, materially poor, perhaps, but spiritually rich. The reality of Calcutta made him reel. Willie, who wanted his own space, made his way through the streets around the thousands of people who called the sidewalks home. Willie saw starvation, children with bloated bellies and sticklike limbs, babies small as monkeys sucking the dry breasts of starving mothers, the skeletal old. Willie saw death, and smelled its smells. He saw deformity, disease, indignity. He saw people shitting and pissing and fucking and giving birth and dying with no roof, no walls to make any act private.

Calcutta was an education in despair. The misery of the streets became his misery, and made his old stateside depressions and dissatisfactions seem childish and self-indulgent. Speaking no Hindi or Bengali, he could offer no comfort except his coins. To count his blessings seemed obscene. He lived in pain, and needed healing. He didn't know where to look for it.

Then one day when he went to the American Express office to collect his mail, Willie met an enterprising young Indian wearing blue jeans and a sweatshirt and selling a mimeographed dictionary of Hinduism that offered concise definitions of dharma, karma, Brahma, and other key concepts, differentiated between the different sects and brands of Hinduism, and at the end provided a listing of the names and addresses of English-speaking gurus, all approved by the Better Business Bureau of Greater Calcutta. Willie struck up a conversation with the dictionary salesman.

'Are you a rock star?' The Indian asked him.

'I'm not even a rock,' Willie told him. 'Just an ordinary guy looking for some answers.'

'What are your questions?'

'Oh, the usual. Where do we come from, where are we going. That kind of thing. I guess you might say I'm looking for peace of mind.'

'You have a religion at home?'

'No. Yes. Well, I'm Jewish.'

'Ah. You have been to Israel?'

'I'm not that Jewish,' Willie said. 'I don't get along too well with the Old Testament God. He's kind of a sexist.'

The Indian nodded vigorously. 'There are many like you. Spiritual enlightenment and cotton are becoming our two biggest exports. America must be a strange place if you come to India for gods.'

'It *is* a strange place,' Willie said. 'It's different here. Everyone seems to cope better, even if they're poor and hungry and living in the streets. At least they're not neurotic.'

'Yes,' the Indian said. 'Ours is a pessimistic philosophy. We expect no better than we get. Say, you want to go to an ashram?'

'Don't you have to be a holy man for that?'

'All men are holy,' the Indian said. 'This is a special retreat for Americans and Englishmen. A short course on the path of knowledge. Yoga, meditation, good eats. Reasonable rates. Your satisfaction guaranteed, or your money comes back. You want directions?'

'Sure,' Willie said.

'Just tell them Jaghit sent you,' the Indian said.

CASSETTE 14 Phil D'Amico/ Alex Stephens

'Things were going well for us,' Phil said. 'So well I started thinking about doing a feature. Something low-budget and sort of classy. Jeannette and I started screening screenplays. She turned out to have very good instincts, Jeanette. She'd put on her nightgown and her cowboy hat and go to bed with a stack of scripts to read.

'One night she was reading this *Exorcist* ripoff and recognizing it for buffalo shit, when I sprang the good news on her. "My folks want to come out for a visit."

'She didn't even look up. "Good. When?"

' "Over Christmas. I was thinking of putting them up at the Holiday House."

' "They can stay here," Jeannette says.

' "It's too tight. Besides, I think they'd get nervous about us."

'Jeannette put the script down. "What are you saying, Phil?"

'I shrugged. "They're old-fashioned people."

'Jeannette says, "Are you ashamed of us?"

'She's hell on honesty. I wouldn't say I was ashamed, just nervous. Just didn't want to rub the folks' noses in it, right? "Come on, Jeannette," I say, "my father is a shoemaker."

' "What are you saying, Phil?"

'I got done in the bathroom and climbed into bed. It's so much nicer to fight when you're comfortable. "What the hell is this what-are-you-saying routine? I'm saying we're living in mortal sin and I don't want to see two nice Italian people stroke out on the beach."

'Jeannette's voice turned to ice. "Why don't you send *me* to the Holiday House?"

' "Christ, Jeannette, if your mother showed up, you'd be nervous about it, too."

'"My mother knows about us," says honest Jeannette.

'"Knowing and seeing are two different things."

'Jeannette was really miffed. She was also trying to make me feel like a hypocrite. "Okay. I'll ask my mother to come out, too. Then we'll get the whole thing over with."

'I thought about Willie in his ashram. No parents, no problems. "I get the feeling Willie is laughing at us," I said,

'"What are you saying, Phil?"

'Third time's the charm. I blew my stack. "One more what-are-you-saying, and I flip. Where the hell did you learn that? From those diky film chicks?"

'Jeannette gave me a steely look. Under the cowboy hat, she looked like Shane. "You are a gigantic, bourgeois, chauvinistic turd. And besides that, you're losing your hair."

'Not what I call fighting fair. "That's a nice thing to say to the man you live with . . . and don't say, 'What are you saying, Phil?' "

'Instead she said, "I never made any promises, Phil."

'"We gotta get married," I told her. "That's all there is to it. You gotta write Willie and get a divorce." I'd been thinking about that a lot off and on,' Phil said. 'Not so much to make an honest woman out of Jeannette. To make an honest man out of me. I'd been running the gauntlet of the St. Theresa's nuns with their rulers in my nightmares ever since we moved in together, but the thought of my parents coming here really brought it to a head. I guess it wasn't exactly the best time and place for a proposal. Jeannette said no.'

'How come?'

'That's what I wanted to know. She says. "I'm not sure. Maybe because one marriage is all I want, maybe because I think it would hurt Willie."

'"Maybe because you still love him." I felt a certain resentment, you know? Willie's off God-knows-where, and Jeannette and I are living as man and wife. We really are. After the first couple of months, we didn't even make love that much.

'"I'll always love Willie," Jeannette said. "You know that."

'"So will I," I say. "You know that." I propose, and we end up arguing about who loves Willie most. Something was definitely wrong here.

'"This is the best I can do," Jeannette tells me.

'"At least we're not hiding anything from him," I said.

'"Phil," Jeannette said, "everything I've ever done has been without thinking. I just *did*. No guilt, no recriminations. Whether it was sex or work or even love. I'm not an intellectual. I just want to be happy."

'It was a nice speech, but I wasn't quite sure what she was getting at. I mean, I already knew she didn't have any miniature nuns with rulers keeping watch in *her* head. "What are you saying, Jeannette?"

'She kissed my forehead. Very wifely. "Is this the way it's gonna be forever?" I asked her.

'Jeannette put the script down on the floor beside the bed. "I seriously doubt it," she says.

'And against my better judgment, I gave in. "I'll tell my folks they can stay with us," I said. "Why is it that my mother always makes me feel six years old?"

'Jeannette laughed. "That's what Willie used to say."

'So we kissed each other good night and snuggled. It wasn't a big enough fight that we had to get it on to make it up,' Phil said.

CASSETTE 14, continued

'So how was your parents' visit?' I asked Phil.

'Ouch,' Phil said.

'Ouch?'

'Unmitigated disaster. I realised as soon as I watched them walk off the plane that things were going to be tough. You ever watch your parents walk off a plane? For thirty seconds, they're strangers. You see them like they really are. My folks are nice, quaint, straight old Italians. My momma walks off the plane hugging a shopping bag with salami peeking out the top. My dad's wearing a polyester suit with a K-of-C lapel button. I get this doomed feeling in the pit of my stomach. I can't change plans now, or Jeannette's gonna lay me out. Anything I do, my mother's gonna lay me out.

'I pull out onto the freeway and pray for small talk. I'll talk about anything, right, as long as it's not personal. "Hey, Pop. Look. There's a Rolls-Royce."

'"Looks like a Pontiac," he says.

'My mother stares out the window. "Where's the streets?"

'Okay, so she's not coming out fighting. "Who said anything about streets?" I say.

' "Where are the people?" my dad asks.

'Also a safe topic. "They're in air-conditioned rooms making deals. So how's Tony?" Tony's my mother's pride and joy. I figure that's about as safe as I can get.

' "He's fine. His wife is expecting again."

' "Four or five?"

' "Five," Momma says. "Thank God for Tony."

'I can tell from her tone she's trying to start something. It's inevitable. "What does that mean, Momma?"

' "We don't understand you, Phillie. You make a lot of money, but you don't have a family."

'I'm getting to the exit. I keep my eyes on the road. "What's making money got to do with me having a family?"

'My dad doesn't want us to fight. The poor guy wants to have a good time in California. Is that so much to ask? He points out the window. "Momma. Look at the ocean."

'My mother takes a three-second glance at the Pacific and turns back to me. "You're almost thirty."

'My dad taps her arm. "This ocean was discovered by a Spaniard. What an ocean. Makes the Atlantic look like a puddle."

'Poor pop. He's doing his best. "I don't want to argue, Momma," I say. Very cool. Nothing to set her off. But she doesn't need my help. She puts on her "reasonable" voice. "We're trying to be modern, Phillie. We want to love this woman you live with." The tempo changes. "This woman with the child who's still married to your best friend."

'Pop's still trying. "Look! Another Rolls-Royce."

'Momma started to cry. "But we're ashamed. We're ashamed."

' "You promised no scenes, Momma."

'Momma appealed to heaven. "Maybe God will be good to me and we'll run into a truck."

'I lost it, I lost my cool. I yelled. "My head is blowing up like a balloon." I was rich. I had six, eight people working for me all the time. And this little Italian lady with the mustache was driving me crazy.

'Pop finally decided it was time to assert his authority. "Stop it, Momma," he says. "We're here on a vacation."

'Momma addresses the Twilight Zone again. "Dear God in heaven, what did I do?"

'Arrggh,' Phil said. 'It was hell. And that was nothing compared to what was coming next.'

'What was coming next?' I asked.

'Willie,' Phil said. 'As soon as I pulled up in front of the house, Jeannette and Zelda come running out, all smiles. For a second I figure if they're this excited about meeting my folks, things are going to work out okay. Then Jeannette tells me, "Phil, I got a letter from Willie today. From Hawaii. He's coming home tomorrow."

'I almost fainted on the spot. "What are you saying, Jeannette?"

'My dad's got the bags out of the Jeep by now. They're standing there looking expectant. "Introduce us, Phillie," he says.

'I did. I felt like I was trapped in one of my own nightmares. Jeannette grabs a couple of suitcases and heads for the house. I take the shopping bag with the salami. My mother walks in, looks around. "How many bedrooms do you have?" she wants to know.

'Jeannette the perfect hostess says, "Two. You can sleep in our room. We'll sleep in Zelda's room, and Willie can have the couch."

'I'm figuring everything would be a lot easier if nobody slept at all. I mean, what's sleep and why should it be causing all these problems? "He can have the bed," I say. "I'll be in the ocean, six feet under."

' "Maybe we should go to a motel," Pop says.

'Then Momma drops the bomb. "Take us back to the airport, Phillie." It was a quiet bomb. I had to ask her to repeat it.

' "Momma, we just got here. We didn't see anything," Pop says.

' "I saw all I need to see, Sal." She turned to Jeannette. "We're simple people. We work hard and go to church on Sunday. Maybe that's against the rules out here. Maybe the modern way is better. But there is no way Mrs. Salvatore D'Amico is going to sleep on the same bed her son is having mortal sin with his best friend's wife on while the best friend is sleeping on the couch. No way!"

'My Momma is not dumb,' Phil said. 'It was a complicated situation, but she got it sorted out.

'"Take us back to the airport, Phillie," my dad says.

'It was all falling apart around me. "Ma, please . . ." Then, pow! My mother slaps me in the kisser. The last time she did that, I was fifteen years old and said something funny about Sister Rosa Maria's warts. Zelda was terrified. She started to bawl. That did it for Jeannette. "Take them back to the airport, Phil," she says.

'Just what Momma was waiting for. She points at Jeannette like she's poison. "See! She didn't want us here in the first place."

'My father hates to see women fight. "Maria! *Basta!* Enough." He grabbed Momma's arm and pulled her out the front door. Jeannette's holding Zelda, trying to get her to stop crying. Pop is holding on to Momma to keep her from scratching somebody's eyes out. Somehow old Phil is the bad guy. I remember thinking life would have been a lot easier in a monastery,' Phil said.

I laughed.

'It's funny now,' he said. 'It wasn't funny then.'

'Did your parents ever forgive you?'

'Not till little Tony was born. It took a grandchild to bring Momma around. Now she prays for me again,' Phil said.

CHAPTER 37

WILLIE & PHIL
by William Kaufman

Willie worked hard in the ashram. He tried to learn the steps of the dance of Shiva; to plug into the dynamic oneness of the universe, which is Brahma; to revere and confront the Fertile Void; to free himself from the chains of karma and of maya.

Willie looked at his hand and said, 'Hand, I only think you are a hand. You are really only an illusion.' At one time or another during his three-month stay, Willie said this to most of the identifiable objects in and around the retreat. He figured if he said it enough, it might get easier to believe, even though he realized, in his better moments, that to name something an illusion was to give it form all over again.

'Willie,' the guru told him, 'oneness is not something you understand with your mind. It is something you experience in your soul. Meditate, Willie. Don't think so much.'

Willie meditated. Willie learned thirteen new breathing techniques. He practiced new Yoga postures and became able to stay longer in the ones he already knew. After three months, Willie's body was more flexible than it had ever been. He could sit three hours in the Serene Lotus position without a charley horse. He could hear molecules bouncing off his eardrums when he meditated. And once in a while, he got it, that elusive experience of oneness. Of course, thinking he had it made him lose it, and Willie was back to square one. He felt like a dog chasing its tail. Round and round and round he went.

For a long time Willie was so into the path that he didn't worry too much about the end of the road. When he did, it

frightened him. 'What you're saying is that when you get there, nothing matters anymore.'

'Ah, Willie. Still trying to formulate.' The guru smiled at him. 'Let us just say it is impossible to realize Brahman and still be neurotic.'

On his pallet at night, Willie practiced telling himself that nothing matters. He tried whispering, 'Jeannette, you don't matter; Phil, you are only an impermanent expression of an ever-changing cosmic dynamism.' It made him feel lonely and sad.

After three months, the best answer Willie had found was that he enjoyed a world of forms and didn't like to think of himself and his friends as mere transitory images on the great screen of life. I am my neuroses, Willie said, and decided to believe it. It was an unorthodox conclusion, but it would have to do.

'I'm leaving,' he told the guru. 'LSD works faster. So does sex.'

The guru gave Willie his blessing. 'Cheer up. Nobody makes much progress in three months. You're a good student, Willie. Come back when you have a few years to spend.'

Willie took his new enlightenment to Bombay. It was a nicer city than Calcutta, and Willie felt more like a tourist now than like a pilgrim. He went to the Hanging Gardens and to the zoo. He hung out for a while in coffee shops around the University of Bombay, and met some engineering students who had been to MIT in Boston. They took him to see Indian movies in the outdoor theater, to the Jehengar Gallery, and to the ancient Buddhist university in some caves north of town. The Indian students were affable and serene. They carried slide rules on their belts and plastic pen sleeves in their shirt pockets. When Willie broached the subject of philosophy, they professed to believe in mathematics and progress.

The certainty Willie took with him from the ashram faded. In a more complex, less centered setting, his cherished neuroses no longer seemed to be the national treasure he had imagined them to be. The old confusion was back, the old longing for a better way. Willie spent a lot of time standing on his head, hoping to make his brain shut up. When he looked in the mirror, the pale, thin stranger with the burning eyes he found there startled him.

One day, as he was walking up the street, Willie passed a

barber shop. A sudden sharp impulse drove him inside. No one in the shop spoke English, so when it came Willie's turn to take the chair, he pulled the rubber band off his ponytail and let his hair down. He made scissors of his fingers and mimed cutting. The barber also made finger scissors and closed them on Willie's hair at shoulder length. Willie shook his head no and pointed at his ears. The barber began to cut.

What he saw in the mirror, his hair growing shorter and shorter, was like watching a film run backwards – now as long as it was when he left California, when he moved to the upstate farm, when he and Jeannette got married. Finally his hair was as short as it was when he first met Phil. There he had the barber stop.

Willie looked in the mirror and laughed. He was lightheaded. He felt reborn or, better yet, restored. In gratitude, he paid the barber double the going rate for haircuts and pantomimed effusive thanks. At long last, Willie had his sense of humor back.

CASSETTE 15 Phil D'Amico/ Alex Stephens

'Christmas Eve day,' Phil said, 'we all went down to the dock to meet the *Snow Queen*. That's Willie's boat from Hawaii. None of us quite knew just who we were gonna meet, but Jeannette and Zelda were very excited. I've got to admit, I was nervous. My folks and Willie within twenty-four hours was a little too much. For all I knew, he was gonna walk off the boat and slug me. He had every right.

'They put down the gangplank and people started pouring off. Fat ladies in muumuus with leis around their necks. Old guys in straw hats with man-eating hibiscus on their shirts, carrying porta-pak pineapples. A dude with a turban who doesn't, thank God, turn out to be Willie. Zelda's jumping up and down trying to spot her daddy, only it's been a while since she's seen him. She's only three years old, right? This Jesus Christ look-alike in a long white robe and shades comes sauntering off.

' "Is that Daddy Willie?" Zelda wants to know.

' "I don't think so, kid. Jeannette, are you sure this is the right boat?"

' "Phil, this is the *only* boat."

'Then, there he was. Good old Willie. He looked normal. Short hair, clean jeans, big smile. He had a terrific tan. Zelda made a beeline for him. Right away, they start in with this cat business, purring and meowing at each other.

' "You got to be a big pussycat," Willie says. He grabs Jeannette and kisses her. "I love you." They look at each other. They smile. "I love you, too," Jeannette says. I've got to admit, I winced. Then Willie gave me a hug, and I knew he wasn't going to hit me. He didn't even seem mad. "I really missed you, Phil," he said.

'"You don't look like an Indian to me," I said.

'Willie tried to get his arms around all three of us. "I want a corned-beef sandwich, a bagel with cream cheese and lox, and a New York *Times*."

'No more bean sprouts. I couldn't believe it. Was it possible we were getting the old Willie back? The sane one? The funny one?

'"Are you enlightened, Willie?" Jeannette asks him.

'"No," he says. "I just lost a few pounds."

'"You look nice," Jeannette says.

'"I feel nice."

'*I* feel like a third wheel. Hail, the conquering hero, and all that. I couldn't help wondering just what Willie had conquered while I'd been holding down the fort, so to speak. "What were you doing in Hawaii?" I ask him. "You were supposed to be in India."

'"Remember Rena?" Willie says. "The Big Rena? She married a bartender in Honolulu. I went to the wedding. She sends her love to both of you."

'"Far-out," I say. Just what I wanted, Rena's love.

'In the car, Willie tells us about his travels. And he's *funny*. He's actually laughing at himself, like the old Willie. And I actually like having him around again. For a while there, before he went, I couldn't really say that. What is it they always say in country-western songs . . . I love him, but I don't like him? I felt like that before he went away.

'Anyway, we got back to the house in Malibu and had a few tokes of some unbelievable grass Willie'd brought back from Hawaii and opened a bottle of wine in honor of its being Christmas Eve. We lit a fire in the fireplace and pretended it was snowing out, and even sang a few carols for the kid. Willie pointed out that Zelda was technically half-Jewish, but Jeannette said, "Let her other half enjoy the holiday," and Willie agreed. It was very cozy. Very nice.

'We stayed up late and let Zelda stay up late, too, to listen for reindeer on the roof. She was very concerned that Santa would burn his butt coming down the chimney, and we had to promise we'd catch him first and let him in through the deck. Everything was fine as long as everybody was up,' Phil said. 'It was the sleeping arrangements that were going to be the killer. Sleep again! Hamlet didn't know how easy he had it.

'Finally, Zelda's practically zonked out on Willie's lap. "Come on, baby," Jeannette says. "We'll tell Santa you had to go to bed." She takes Zelda upstairs for the toothbrushing, face-washing ritual and all that stuff. For the first time, I find myself wishing Willie wasn't there. While he's been off seeing the world for the last eight months, I've been putting his little girl to bed. I *like* kissing her good night. When Jeannette calls downstairs, "Ready for bed," like she does every night, I just sit there. I don't move. Willie does. It's his right. He starts for the stairs. Then he turns around and comes over to me.

'"Aren't you coming, Uncle Phil?" He takes my hand and pulls me up from the couch. "Come on."

'It's against my better judgment. I guess I'm old-fashioned. I believe kids are sacred. I believe in symmetry, multiples of two – two parents, four grandparents, eight great-grandparents, et cetera. The three of us tuck Zelda in. We kiss her good night.

'"Good night, sweet girl," Jeannette says.

'"Good night, kid," Uncle Phil says.

'Willie purrs. "Sweet dreams, pussycat."

'Zelda smiles back at us from her little bed. 'Night, Mommy, 'night, Uncle Phil, 'night, Daddy Willie." Jesus, she was a beautiful little kid. We turned out the light and left her purring.

'We went back downstairs. I put another log on the fire and watched it catch. You ever watch a fire when you're stoned? I could do it all night. There's a point where the whole side of a log is hot coals, little glowing red squares, like a mosaic, and they flicker black along the edges, so it looks like the whole thing is alive and breathing. I watched the fire. It was evident to me that things were going to get a whole lot heavier before the night was out. You can't be as deeply involved as the three of us were and expect pleasant chitchat all the time. I decided I might as well say what was on my mind. "I got to be honest with you," I said. "I think this is confusing to the kid."

'Jeannette's filling our wineglasses. I see her spill a drop. "What are you saying, Phil?"

'I looked over to Willie, stretched out in his chair. "She learned a new phrase while you were gone."

'I sat down on the sofa, and after Jeannette was through playing hostess for a while, she sat down beside me, not close. More like we'd just met at a cocktail party, or else we'd been married for twenty years. We were all very aware of space that

night, who's where, where we put our bodies. It would have been much easier not to *have* bodies.

'"There's nothing to be confused about," Willie says. 'I'm only staying a few days.'

'"Then what happens?" Jeannette says.

'Willie leaned forward in the chair. "I'm going back to New York. I want to teach again. Maybe get my doctorate and teach college." He sounds like he knows what he wants.

'"You're full of surprises," Jeannette says.

'Willie shrugs. "Everything that happened was supposed to happen. Everything."

'"You're still a mystic," I say. I'm a little PO'd. Mystic Willie tends to get my goat.

'"I'm here to see the three people I love most," Willie says. "Then I'm on my way to look for a job. That's all there is to it."

'Willie's emptied his wineglass. Jeannette gets up to pour him some more. "You still love Jeannette?" I ask him.

'"Of course," he says.

'"Then what is this that's-all-there-is-to-it crap?"

'"I still love you, too," Willie says.

'"But you're not married to me." I know I'm nagging. I know I sound like my mother. But I also figure I'm right. Willie Kaufman ought to grow up.

'Willie grinned at me. "Do you want to get married?"

'First proposal I ever had. "To you? Sure. Hey, Mom, Pop. Great News. Willie and I are getting married."

'Willie looked contrite. "Jeannette, he's right. We should get a divorce."

'Jeannette says, "I don't want a divorce."

'We'd been over this ground before. I didn't like it any better the second time around. "She's still in love with you, Gumba. I ought to be put in jail for life. I stole my best friend's wife."

'"What are you talking about?" Willie says. "I'm the one who left."

'"Yeah, but I'm the one who did the dirty deed." We had a great game of guiltier-than-thou going, but Jeannette, who's been real quiet, doesn't want to play. She shoots up off the sofa.

'"Damn both of you. I'm the one who made the decisions," she said. "I did what I wanted to do." She's in front of the fireplace now, which is about as far away as she can get from either Willie or me and still be in the same room. She lights a

cigarette. "The two of you are still one big male ego. *You* did. *You* did." She points at me, then Willie, with a thrust of her chin. "The hell with that noise. *I* did." Then she kind of folded up and sat down on one of the pillows on the floor.

'We were both quiet for a minute; then Willie said, "I'll come here summers and see Zelda." He sounded like something between a grown-up making plans and a kid saying to his mother "Ma, I'll clean my room if I can go play with Artie."

'Jeannette called him. "You're just running away because you're afraid," she said.

'Willie considered it. "It's possible, but I don't think so."

'I couldn't stand it anymore. "You stay, Willie. I'm the one who should go."

'Jeannette pulled back the screen and tossed her cigarette butt into the fire. "Maybe the only way to solve it is to end it all.'

'I didn't like that kind of talk. She sounded deadly serious, pardon the pun. I went and sat down facing her, tried to take hold of her hands, but she wouldn't let me. "You mean suicide?"

'Jeannette put her hands palm-down on her thighs and smiled at me. "No, Phillie. Just all go our own way."

'Willie grabbed a pillow and sat down next to me. We were both facing Jeannette; she was the apex. "Jeannette, stay with Phil," Willie said.

' "Stay with Willie," I told her.

'This is making it sound like neither one of us wanted her,' Phil said, 'but that wasn't how it was. At least, I don't think so. It was more like we were both trying to be noble, something like that. Jeannette *knew* we wanted her.

'Jeannette says, "Is life *before* death possible?" She's been reading Fritz Perls, right? She sounds very tired.

'So Willie asks her, "What do you want, Jeannette?" '

'I'm glad somebody finally got around to that,' I said. 'It's kind of an important question.'

'Let's keep your feminist feelings out of this,' Phil said.

'Sure,' I said. 'What did Jeannette want?'

'Peace of mind and instant gratification. She asked us *both* to stay.'

'Oh, boy,' I said. 'And?'

'Willie said, "Ménages à trois are notoriously difficult."

'Jeannette says, "Does that mean you'll stay?"

'"For a while," Willie said. "Okay?"

'She looks at me. "Phil?"

'"I always was a glutton for punishment," I said.

'So now that she's settled our hash, Jeannette smiles sweetly and tells us both good night. "I've got to get up early. I'm getting into the editor's union." And off she goes, up the stairs, and leaves us sitting there in front of the fire. It's getting low, but I don't feed it. The silence is deafening. I listen for the sound of hoofsteps on the roof. I wish Santa would come down the chimney. For diversion.

'Finally, Willie stretches. "Good night, Phil," he says.

'"Good night, Willie," I tell him. We both sit there some more.

'"Go on up to your bedroom, Phil," Willie says.

'"No way."

'"I'm sleeping on the floor," Willie says.

'"So am I."

'Willie took off his pants. I took off my pants. Willie lay down facing one way. I lay down next to him, facing the other way. I reached up and turned off the lamp. "See you in the morning, kid."

'"Good night, Gumba," Willie said. In the firelight, I could see him smiling'.

I laughed.

'What's funny?' Phil said.

'Jeannette had the whole bed all to herself.'

'You got it, kid,' Phil said.

CHAPTER 39

WILLIE & PHIL
by William Kaufman

So it began, the Malibu Triangle, the Sexless Ménage. Willie and Phil and Jeannette. Phil worked. Jeannette worked. Willie was back to his former role of homemaker/caretaker, but now, with a goal before him, he didn't mind so much. Now during Zelda's naps he got ready for his Graduate Record Exams in English literature by reading all the footnotes in the Norton Anthologies. He memorized the real name of Jonathan Swift's mistress and learned that between lines 36 and 37 in the writing of *Kubla Khan*, Coleridge was interrupted by a person on business from Porlock. He mastered Hopkins' scheme of scansion and found out where Shakespeare copped his plots. With a mind full of facts like that, who could worry?

Phil did most of the cooking. Getting successful meant he could no longer practice many of the manual skills of filmmaking, but had to delegate even the jobs he enjoyed most to specialists and union technicians. In the kitchen, he could be a craftsman again. And no matter what his mother thought of her son's morals, she would have been proud of his spaghetti. It was superb.

Jeannette continued to sleep alone. No one had anything going on the side. Celibacy and sublimation were definitely in. The hot tub worked the same magic as a cold shower, but more pleasantly. By setting the temperature high enough and soaking long enough, you could effectively wilt your libido. The weekends, they filled with activity. They found a three-wheeled, three-seated bike and pedaled to picnic sites, while Zelda rode after them on her shiny new tricycle. They ate and laughed, ate

and played Frisbee, ate and swam. All four of them gained weight.

As the weather grew warmer, they spent more and more time on the beach. They built turreted castles, condominiums, whole retirement villages, and walled cities out of sand, then watched the waves demolish them as the tide rolled in. They flew kites and counted seagulls. Jeannette rented a horse and rode bareback on the beach while Willie and Phil and Zelda ran after her.

One warm day, when all the grown-ups wanted to do was nap in the sun, Zelda set to work with her red plastic shovel and buried all three of them up to their necks in the sand. She laughed and laughed at the sight of their three disembodied heads, and had to be bribed with a banana split to dig them out before sundown.

Because loving Zelda was the most uncomplicated thing in their lives, the most pure, Willie and Phil and Jeannette all three lavished affection on her. Zelda was hugged, kissed, cuddled, or purred at a hundred times a day and even more on weekends, when everyone was home. Contrary to Phil's fears, Zelda showed no sign of being confused by having 150 percent the normal amount of parents and parenting, not the least bit spoiled, unless you think that to be unusually well-loved constitutes spoilage. She was a sunny child and liked everyone, even the teenage babysitters who stayed with her while Willie and Phil and Jeannette went out for a drink, or a movie, or to a Dodgers game.

For months it was a stable triangle, unshaken by Eros or acrimony. All their acquaintenances thought them remarkably civilized. Sometimes they even congratulated themselves for pioneering a new frontier in human relations. If anyone had gripes or growing pains, for a long time no one expressed them; it was too important, for a long time, to believe things were as good as they appeared to be. On the surface, all was calm, all was shiny, all was bright.

That was the surface.

CASSETTE 16 Phil D'Amico/ Alex Stephens

'We'd been disco roller-skating over in Venice. Even at that, I'm an over-achiever,' Phil said. 'Only, those little wheels are very unforgiving. I did a number on my back. I was itching for a shot of bourbon, for its analgesic properties, you know, but I waited to pour it till Jeannette paid off the baby-sitter and sent her home. Cute kid,' Phil said. 'She lived right next door. Just past the Lolita stage, about fourteen. She made me feel old as the hills.

' "Anybody for a nightcap?" I ask.

' "No thanks," Jeannette says. "I'm meeting Helen real early tomorrow."

'Jeannette joined this feminist film cooperative, and by then she had more women friends than the pope had robes. I can't keep them all straight. "Helen who?" I ask her.

' "Thorakis," Jeannette says. "She's got a project she wants to talk to me about."

' "What does she do?" Willie asks. He's got even less concept of her life than I do.

' "She's a filmmaker. She wants to do a low-budget movie about Russian immigrants in New York."

' "Sounds interesting," Willie says.

' "It is." Jeannette gives us both the usual chaste peck on the cheek. "See you guys in the morning," and she's gone.

'So Willie and I do our usual routine – we collect a bottle and the backgammon set and head out to the hot tub. It's the best cure we'd come up with for watching Jeannette walk up those stairs alone night after night. I poured myself another dink. "I sure wish I had her energy," I say.

'Willie sets up the board. "Phil, you're free to go. So am I."

'It was a nice night. They were *all* nice nights. "Leopard shit,"

told him. "We're prisoners. Remember the Buñuel movie, *The Exterminating Angel*?"

'"Where all the people are at the New Year's party and can't leave?"

'"Right. The party is over and they want to split. But they can't."

'"Great movie," Willie says. "I love Buñuel."

'"They don't know why they can't, but they can't. They just cannot walk out the door."

'"We can walk out anytime we want to," Willie says. He's stripped off his clothes and climbed in the tub. I'm still working on mine. "No way! We're stuck like two dogs in heat!" My back hurts. My head is starting to. I climb in the hot tub.

'Willie says, "They finally got out by reliving the party from the beginning. Remember?"

'I remembered. "Maybe we should start all over from the beginning." I decided to say what was on my mind. "I'm going crazy, Willie."

'Willie says, "I know."

'"Let me go."

'"Okay."

'"I can't."

'"You want me to go?" Willie says.

'"Not really."

'"I know," he says.

'There we sit in the hot tub, under the stars. I get this vision of us still sitting there thirty years later. I'm bald. Willie's got a long white beard. Jeannette's still got the cutest little ass of any senior citizen in town. It scares the crap out of me. "Jesus Christ." I found myself looking up at Jeannette's window. I couldn't see her, but the shadows moved when she did. "Hey," I said to Willie, "maybe she'll take her clothes off. We can look from the pool."

'Willie was staring wistfully up at the same window. If there'd been a full moon, we would have howled at it. We were both going nuts. It'd come down to that,' Phil said.

CHAPTER 40

WILLIE & PHIL
by William Kaufman

It was just dawn. The sun wasn't up yet. Neither was Phil, or Jeannette, or Zelda. Willie was wide-awake. He had been awake for some time. Now was the time. Quietly, ever so quietly, he got up from the living room floor where he and Phil slept side by side, and crept up the stairs to his wife's bedroom. The door stood wide open. She trusted them that much.

Jeannette was asleep. In the soft light in the white room, she looked beautiful and peaceful, small, alone in the big bed. Willie sat beside her, found a leg under the covers, and tapped on it. 'Jeannette,' he whispered. 'Jeannette. Wake up.'

Nothing moved but her eyelids, slowly rising. 'What's the matter, Willie?'

'I have to talk to you.'

Now Jeannette raised herself on one elbow to peer at the clock. 'It's a quarter past five, Willie.'

'Sorry. We never have time to talk alone.'

Jeannette swallowed a yawn. Willie imagined how warm her skin was, under the covers, and how soft. 'Can't we talk about it later?' Jeannette said.

Willie shook his head. 'Phil is flipping.'

'He'll be all right.'

Willie disagreed. 'Not only is he guilty, he's guilty about being guilty.'

'Willie, can't we talk about this in the morning?'

But it was morning, and Willie wouldn't be put off. When she understood this, Jeannette lifted the covers and invited Willie to

limb in. He snuggled close, and Jeannette propped her head on his shoulder, rested an arm across his stomach, a leg across his legs. It felt good, dangerously good, to be so close again. 'Jeannette, I think you should take him back to your bed,' Willie said.

'I don't want to sleep with Phil.'

Willie gave a questioning thrust with his pelvis. 'Do you want to sleep with me?'

Jeannette snuggled closer, so the top of her head touched his chin. 'No.'

With the hand of the arm that circled her, Willie touched her cheek. Soft. 'I'm not horny, Jeannette, but we have to break this mind we're in.'

'No sex, Willie.'

'What if I insisted on it? You're still my wife.'

She turned toward him slightly, and Willie could feel the pressure of her breast against him. 'You won't,' she said.

She was right, of course, but Willie didn't understand how he knew it when he didn't know it himself until she said it. 'Jeannette, you are a sphinx.'

'You're free to go if you want,' Jeannette said.

This is my wife, Willie thought, but it didn't quite seem real. 'Do you want me to go?'

'No.' Jeannette's arm tightened around him, almost the way Zelda's did when she didn't want to fall asleep alone, in the dark.

'Then what do you want?'

'I don't know, but its getting clearer.'

Willie stroked Jeannette's hair. 'Do you want us to stop loving you so you can go?'

Again Jeannette said No. In fact, she was saying No so much she sounded like Zelda at two. 'Are you getting into a gay thing?' Willie asked.

'Women? No.' As if to prove it, she moved against Willie. He believed.

'Maybe we should flip another coin,' Willie said. If he'd won Jeannette by the toss of a coin, maybe that was the best way to lose her, too. Trouble was, he didn't especially want to lose her. Or himself. Or Phil.

Jeannette traced Willie's jawline with her fingertip. 'That would be too easy,' she said. 'I know it sounds real mysterious,

but I just have this feeling the whole thing's gonna unravel in its own way.'

There are worse things to trust, Willie thought, than a woman's intuition. He held her close.

CASSETTE 17 Phil D'Amico/ Alex Stephens

I woke up with the answer,' Phil said. 'I had a dream, and I was villing to trust it. I would have believed anything at that point. If there'd been chickens in the neighborhood, I would have ooked in their entrails for omens. It was just light, around five-hirty, and Willie wasn't there. I figured he'd gotten up early nd gone out on the beach to meditate. He did that sometimes. I vas *glad* he wasn't there. I wanted to tell Jeannette about my lream. We never seemed to have time alone to talk anymore, ıot since Willie'd come back.

I got up and snuck up the stairs, very quiet, just in case Willie vas still in the house. I tiptoed into the bedroom. Willie and eannette were in bed together. Under the covers. Cozy. I walk n and Willie sits up faster than the sandwich man at a New ork deli. "Sorry, Jeannette. I thought you were alone."

' "We were just talking," Willie says, and looks so guilty it's lmost impossible to believe him. Jeannette reaches for her igarettes and lights one up real fast.

' "You sure I'm not interrupting anything more dramatic, naybe?" It would have been a solution, I guess,' Phil said. 'But still didn't want it to be true.'

'It wasn't,' I told him. 'They were just cuddling. I've read that art of Willie's book.'

'You believe everything you read, kid?'

'I believe that at that point Jeannette didn't want a sexual elationship with either one of you. She was trying to get clear. ex would only have made it harder.'

'Things were pretty hard *without* sex,' Phil said. 'Sometimes I hought the best thing to do would be to drop acid again and see ow things sorted themselves out.'

'Cop out,' I said.

'Look, why don't you just keep your opinions to yourself? That wasn't what happened, anyway. Willie insisted they were just talking. He pulled back the covers so I could see he had his shorts on. I sat down on the bed myself. Hell, it was *my* bed, when it comes right down to it.

' "I had a nightmare," I told them. "There were three giant salamis hanging in a store window. You, me, and Jeannette. Nobody would buy us. We just hung there in the window, for years and years. Pretty soon, we began to cry. Then people came from far and near to see the three crying salamis. The church ordained us a miracle. But that didn't help. Nobody wanted us. In fact, now it was even worse. We had become a holy shrine. The Shrine of the Crying Salamis. Then one day, another miracle occurred. One of the salamis disappeared. And then there were just two salamis. And the two salamis lived happily ever after. So," I told them, "I'm splitting in the morning."

'What do I get? Nothing but arguments. "No, Phil," Willie says. "I'm going. The dream is about Italians. You stay."

'Jeannette apparently thought it was very funny. "Phil, I'm not a salami."

' "What are you laughing at, Jeannette? I'm going. I'm going."

' "So am I," Willie says. We both got up off the bed. I really intended to leave. It sounds like Willie means it, too. Jeannette just lies there in bed and smiles wisely at us. "See you in the morning," she says, like she doesn't believe we're gonna get as far as the corner. "I'm going back to sleep."

' "I'm really going," I tell her.

' "Me too," Willie says.

'Jeannette puts her finger to her lips. "Shhh. You'll wake Zelda."

' "I tell you, I'm splitting," I say to Willie, since Jeannette obviously doesn't take me or my salamis seriously.

' "I am, too," Willie says. "I'm splitting myself."

'Before we got to the door, Jeannette was curled up under the covers again, all alone in that big bed in that big bedroom. My bedroom. She put her pillow over her head so she wouldn't have to hear us talking.

'Willie and I went downstairs and made a pot of coffee, swearing to each other that this was it, we were gonna cut out of

there that day. No more three salamis crying, no more sleeping on the living-room floor, no more long nights in the hot tub, trying to catch a glimpse of skin through the bedroom window. This little salami, at least, was gonna be *free*,' Phil said.

CHAPTER 41

WILLIE & PHIL
by William Kaufman

Willie's vision of Professor Kaufman, complete with aromatic pipe, leather elbow patches, and a Ph.D from NYU, wasn't strong enough to extricate him from the present tangle. Phil's salami didn't save them from themselves. Horoscopes, numerology, and frequent castings of the I Ching presented no clear escape route. Jeannette just smiled, sphinxlike, and told them to trust in time; she was. Of course, when you thought about it, she had free child care, a live-in-cook, and a room of her own. It was easy for Jeannette to trust time.

Phil was showing signs of desperation. He smoked eighty cigarettes a day and coughed and wheezed all night. The sides of his thumbs, where he picked at them, were red and raw. He smoked less dope and drank more booze. Next to a couple of common pronouns and prepositions, 'guilt' was the most frequently exercised word in his vocabulary.

Willie felt like Hamlet, unable to act. From his teaching days, he remembered his student Wilson's canny diagnosis that Hamlet procrastinated because he wasn't getting laid. Willie advanced this theory to Phil. 'Maybe we should just go out and get it on.'

'Yeah? With who?' Phil said.

'Does it matter, as long as they're warm and female? Maybe that's all we need to break the spell.'

'It's not so easy to pick up women in L.A.,' Phil said. 'They're all in cars.'

'We could drive around.'

'You don't really want to do that, do you?' Phil asked.

'No, I guess not. It just seems like anything's worth trying at this point.'

'Consider this,' Phil said. 'We all go to see my shrink, Murray. He's a great guy, Willie.'

Finally Willie overcame some of his resistance to shrinkage, at least enough to say, 'Okay. I will if Jeannette will.'

'If he's one of these chauvinist Freudians who try to put women in boxes, forget it,' Jeannette said.

'Murray's very liberated,' Phil assured her. 'He's probably more liberated than you are. At least give it a chance.'

They gave it a chance. Murray's office was all stainless steel and plexiglass and had a terrific view. Murray himself had long stringy hair, a kempt beard, and a good tan. He wore a tennis jacket partway unzipped to show a V of tanned chest, and white pants. Phil said he was a very hip guy.

Murray got up to shake their hands and to seat them elbow to elbow on the couch that faced his desk. As soon as he sat down on his side, he inverted a little plexiglass and stainless-steel hour-glass, and time became money. Because Murray was Phil's analyst, and Phil was used to the pressure, he began. Always a fast talker, Phil accelerated to Olympic-record-setting speed in Murray's office with the sands running through the funnel. He gave Murray a quick, a very quick rundown of their common problem. Willie and Jeannette nodded briskly in agreement. Then they all waited and watched the sands race as Murray bit off a hangnail and pondered.

Finally he spoke. All three leaned forward expectantly. 'It's as if you all wanted permission from some authority figure to break the triad,' Murray said. 'Well, I'm afraid I can't do that for you.'

Jeannette, who'd broken a medium-important appointment to be there, looked at Phil. 'I told you it would be a waste of time.'

Murray obviously didn't like to give refunds. 'Not necessarily,' he said. 'I admit, I never had a case quite like this, but you'd be surprised how many complicated situations come into this room.'

Willie had read somewhere that shrinks were supposed to make their clients feel unique. So far, so good.

Phil was chain-smoking as usual. 'Do you think we're crazy, Murray?' he asked.

Rule two: Be reassuring. Murray reassured him. 'No, n
You're in a very stressful situation, but you're not crazy. N
one here is crazy. This is not craziness we're talking about.'

Willie wondered if Murray would say the same to Son c
Sam. 'I have to be honest with you, Mr Chaseman,' he said.

'Murray,' Murray said.

'Murray. I don't have much faith in therapy.'

Murray smiled knowingly: 'But you're here, aren't you?'

Willie smiled back, less knowingly, 'I think so.'

Murray zeroed in on Jeannette, 'Jeannette, why don't you li
alone?'

Jeannette explained. 'Willie is the father of my child and Ph
is the man I've lived with, and I feel real close to both of them.

'You still haven't answered my question, Jeannette.'

She wasn't about to, either. 'Why don't Willie and Phil liv
alone?' she said.

'They seem to have formed a unique dependence on you.'

'Is that my fault?' Jeannette obviously didn't think so.

Willie wondered. Murray didn't. 'There is no fault implied
Jeannette.'

Phil heard the word 'fault' and embraced it like a lost re
lation. 'If it's anyone's fault, it's mine,' he said.

'Phil, Phil,' Murray chided. 'No need to feel guilt. We'v
covered that territory a long time now.'

'Murray, let's get one thing straight,' Phil said. 'I could go t
you for ten years and still feel guilty, okay?'

Rule three: Confront the patient. Murray confronted Phi
'You realize that's a very hostile thing you're saying to me.'

Willie was fascinated, watching Phil and Murray. It re
minded him of something, himself with his own mother, maybe
when he was about twelve. 'I think you're a wonderful shrink
Phil said. 'But I think this time this situation is just too big fo
any one shrink to handle.'

'Phil, you know how I feel about the word "shrink".'

Phil slapped his hand over his mouth and made gaggin
noises to illustrate to Willie and Jeannette how Murray fe
about the word 'shrink'.

'Okay, okay,' Murray said.

'I'm sorry, I'm sorry,' Phil said.

Murray was placated. 'Okay. Okay. Okay. You know, th
brings to mind a Sufi tale that might shed some light on th

dilemma . . .[2] He leaned back in his chair, Phil leaned forward in his.

'A woman is leaning out the window, let's say in Persia,[3] Murray went on. 'Her husband is out on the street. It's midnight. It's pitch black. She looks out the window and says, "Omar . . ." ' Willie watched Murray's eyes travel to the hourglass; most of the sand was in the bottom. Rule four: Leave 'em hanging.

'Ahhh,' Murray said. 'We're running out of time for today. I would like to continue this at another meeting.'

Jeannette wanted her money's worth, now. If Murray wasn't going to solve their problem, the least he could do was finish his story. She demanded to know what happened.

'Well, it's too long a story to get into at this time. I would *like* to finish it – please excuse me for beginning – but this is much too complicated to handle in one session. So, if it's possible, I would like to meet with the three of you for another session and see where it goes from there.'

The last grain of sand sifted through. Murray stood, which levitated Phil, who asked, 'What about my private sessions?'

'We'll continue, Phil. They go on. No stop there, okay?'

Never tell a man he's well. Willie stood up. 'Somehow I think that this is not the answer.[4]

'But thank you for your time, Murray,' Jeannette said.

'See you tomorrow at eight, Murray,' Phil said. 'Thanks.[5]

Murray ushered them outward. 'My door is always open, kids.' He called beyond them, to his receptionist. 'Grace, you can send the Olsens and the Kramers in now.'

In the waiting room, two nice-looking couples in middle-middle age rose and headed for Murray's lair. When the door closed behind them, Jeannette shuddered. 'We've got to get out of this thing before it's too late for all of us.'

'Maybe what we need is a fourth,' Willie said. 'Then we could take up bridge.[1]

'Just one more session,' Phil said.

Willie patted Phil's shoulder. 'No, thanks,' he said. 'I've got a book of Sufi tales at home.[1]

CASSETTE 18 Phil D'Amico/ Alex Stephens

'Friday, August twelfth,' Phil said. 'I remember that date like I remember my birthday and Christmas. The biggie. Zelda got up early and came down and woke up Willie and me. She'd seen some surfers from her window and wanted to go watch. Why not? Willie and I were zombies by then. Broken men. Mere shadows of our former selves. Zelda's little smile was about the only thing that made either one of us feel sane. So we took her out on the beach. She had us each by the hand. One kid wiped out and Zelda loved it. "Daddy Willie, can I be a surfer when I grow up?"

'"Sure, pussycat. You can do whatever you want when you grow up. But I thought you wanted to be a veterinarian."

'"Can't I be both?" Zelda wants to know. Then we see her. Jeannette. She's walking toward us, drinking a cup of coffee. Jeannette on the beach on a weekday morning is unheard-of. I mean, usually she sleeps till the last minute, brushing her teeth, and flies to work. I see her and I expect the worst. My father's had a stroke. Willie's mother's been run over by a taxi. Tony's wife miscarried.

'"Good morning," Jeannette says.

'We tell her good morning back. Zelda lets go of us and takes off after a school of sandpipers down the beach. When she wasn't a pussycat, Zelda liked to play sandpiper.

'"I had a dream," Jeannette said. If she's coming down here on Friday morning, it's got to be big, right? We look at her. Go on, Jeannette. Tell us your dream. I find myself hoping it's clearer than the salamis.

'Jeannette fell in between us and started walking. "Remember that day we first met? I dreamed I was in Washington Square Park and I was lonely and I wanted to go to the movies,

only no one showed up. No Willie, no Phil. My daddy was there. I was ten years old and I was sitting on Wy-Pot. I was sitting on my pony in Washington Square Park. Then all of a sudden I was crying because everyone was laughing at me. So I started to ride away on my pony. Faster and faster. All of a sudden, I was flying. We were flying over Manhattan. It was fabulous. Me and my pony."

'Jeannette was really into that dream. She was just like a little kid. Smiling. Her eyes were shining.

' "Daddy was yelling at me to come down, y'know, that it was dangerous. I could get killed. But I just kept on flying. I waved at all the people down there on the ground. There was no way I was going to come down. I wasn't afraid of anything."

'She did a little skip step, then took us each by the hand, just like Zelda had, and we walked a few steps without saying anything. Then she told us. "I called Helen a few minutes ago and told her I'm coming to work with her in New York. I'm taking Zelda. I haven't the slightest idea what's going to happen next. But I know what I have to do."

' "How did the dream end?" Willie asked.

' "I don't know. I just woke up."

' "New York is brutal in the summer," I said.

'Jeannette turned away from us and called for Zelda. She comes running up the beach lickety-split toward us, and I remember thinking, "This is the last time, kid". Jeannette gave us both a quick kiss on the cheek. "See you, Phil. See you, Willie. I love you both." No time for tears or arguments or anything else. She took Zelda by the hand and they turned and walked away. We stood there like a couple of dummies and watched them go. It didn't seem possible.

' "Just like that," I said.

' "How else?" Willie says. "One foot in front of the other."

' "Nine years. Nine crazy years!"

' "Nine is a very significant number," Willie said. We started walking again. It seemed to help.

' "Significant, my asshole," I said. "She walked out on us."

' "She's doing us a favor," Willie said.

'I'm getting a little pissed off with his mystic resignation routine. "At least we could have had a say in the matter." How am I going to explain *this* one to my mother? She thinks Betty

White is a feminist, for Christ's sake.

'"This was the only way. Don't you see that, Phil?"[1]

'"Turtle shit! You could have left. I could have left." It would've been better, I figured, than getting left.

'"No way. It had to be Jeannette,"[2] Willie says.

'"How did this happen to me? How did a gumba like me get into this predicament?"[3]

'Willie comes back with more of his unctuous bullshit. "We all made our own choices, Phil."

'I stopped walking and looked Willie in the eye. "You know something? I think you're *glad* she's splitting."[2]

'"In a way, I am," Willie says.

'That got me. It really got me. I mean, what's happened to Willie's balls, anyway? "What kind of man are you?" I say. "Your wife walks out on you *with* your kid, and you're glad."

'"You're shouting, Phil," Willie said. "At this moment, you are not a rational human being."

'Damn right, I was shouting. I shouted louder. "You're fucking A I'm not rational. I'm a hot-blooded fucking dago and I'm proud of it," I tell him.

Willie's voice didn't get louder, it got harder. "What is that supposed to mean? Is that some sort of anti-Semitic remark or what?" Willie shoved me, not hard, but the way you do in a bar when you're drunk and trying to start something.

'"It means whatever you want it to mean."[2]

'"Take it back," Willie says.

'"Make me."[2] I can feel it building up inside me. I'm asking for it.

'Willie yells, "Spaghetti head!"[3]

'I laughed. I mean, was that the best he could do? "Wooo. Fuckin' Jew-boy, you can fight, huh?" We circled each other, right by the water. I stepped back and got my pants wet, but I didn't care.

'"Wop face!" Willie screams.

'That did it. I called him a matzo ball and a kike.

'"Greaseball!"[3]

'"Jew bastard!" I wanted to hurt him. I really did.

'"Anti-Semite!" Willie hissed.

'"Goddamn Christ killer!" War must feel like that. Blind. I thought I was gonna explode. Willie hauled off and smashed me one in the face. My teeth cut the inside of my lip. I could taste

blood in my mouth. That did it. I wanted to beat the crap out of the bastard. I swung back and landed one in his face. I really hit him hard. My knuckles hurt for a week. We just kept coming at each other, swinging. Ali we're not, but we're both mad, both crazy, you know, and we landed enough to do each other harm. I sent Willie a good one, and he tripped over his own feet and fell down. I jumped on him. I was using everything I had – knees, nails, teeth, the works. I couldn't keep him down. We rolled over and over. He's on top, I'm on top, he's on top. We roll into the water. I get water up my nose. I can't breathe. I want to drown him. Christ killer, I'm thinking, bloody kike motherfucker.

'He tried to get up, and I nailed him. We're wet. We're bleeding. I don't know about Willie, but I'm getting exhausted. Then something, I don't know if it's the water or the sand up my nose or what, but something tells me this is enough. Maybe I've run out of adrenaline. Willie's face is all screwed up. Crazy. He's gonna hit me again. I put up my hand to stop him. He takes my hand. It's over.[1]

'Jesus,' I said.

Phil laughed. 'Yeah. It was some fight. All we could do for about ten minutes was just lie there on the beach and let the waves wash over us. Then Willie says, "Let's go back to the house." We limped on up and I grabbed a bottle of bourbon and we climbed into the hot tub, clothes and all. Jeannette had already split. We got good and drunk together. Then later on we got out ice cubes and bandages and the Absorbine Jr. and patched each other up,' Phil said. 'What are friends for?'

CHAPTER 43

WILLIE & PHIL
by William Kaufman

One day Jeannette announced she was leaving. Someone had finally found the key to the lock and used it. It was what they'd been waiting for all summer.

Willie was inclined to see it as an act of kindness. For a hundred reasons, some of which he understood and some of which he didn't, he couldn't be the one to leave. He could not do it. Jeannette could, and did, and he was grateful.

Phil was not so grateful. His machismo was outraged. He didn't like to get left. He wasn't *supposed* to get left. It was impossible for him to admit that Jeannette was the strongest of the three of them, or that it was her job to set them free. He was mad and got madder as he and Willie walked along the beach. He wanted Willie to get mad, too. He got mad at Willie for not getting mad.

Phil provoked Willie every way he could. Ultimately, Willie got mad at Phil. First it was names – Jew-boy, kike, Christ killer. Spaghetti head, greaseball, wop face, Willie yelled back. It was funny, Willie thought when he was rational again, that after nine years of friendship, their hostility came out in ethnic slurs. He always wondered, after, how it would have gone if they'd *both* been Italians, or both been Jews.

The hostility was real. Willie's adrenaline was slow to rise, but once it did, it pumped hard. At first, Willie was afraid of losing control, but when he did, when he crossed over the boundary of civilization into no-man's land, or every-man's, he kind of liked it. Much of it hurt to hit and be hit, there was something sensual, something pleasurable about the letting go.

They pounded on each other. They rolled in and out of the surf. Phil, Phil's face and body, became the target for all the anger Willie ever felt at everyone and everything. Willie hadn't even known he was angry He went crazy. He fought like hell.

Phil stopped the fight. Willie could no more have stopped the fight than he could have been the one to leave. They were both bloody and soaking. About the only thing left to do was kill each other. Phil put up his hand, and Willie took it, and the fight was over.

Everything happened just the way it was supposed to happen.

CASSETTE 19 Phil D'Amico/ Alex Stephens

'I certainly wouldn't say we followed Jeannette,' Phil said, 'bu within six months we were all back in New York. I'd put in my bid to do some spots for the "I Love New York" civic-pride campaign, and I got the job. You know, the one that was supposed to make people feel better about the city going bankrupt. It had two high points – one, I met the mayor. Two, I got to shoot the Goodyear blimp from a helicopter. When that came through, I had to move fast, so Willie stayed in California until the Malibu house sold. Then he drove a U-Haul back with all our crap.

'New York was the only state Willie was certified to teach in, and without Jeannette bringing in the bucks, old Willie had to get himself a job. That meant New York. Besides, he wanted to be close enough to see Zelda. He ended up teaching English to Spanish kids in the South Bronx. He said kids had changed a lot since he was in the classroom last. Instead of getting stoned, now they drank beer and discoed in class. The one thing that hadn't changed was that they still didn't get off on Shakespeare. For drill, Willie'd have 'em translate Lady Macbeth's big speech into Spanish. Since he couldn't read Spanish, he had no idea what they actually wrote down, but as long as a kid handed in something, Willie'd give him an A for effort. He had a kind of live-and-let-live policy with his kids. They let him live, he didn't hassle them.

'Jeannette ran sound on Helen Thorakis' film about Russian immigrants. In fact, I let her use my Nagra a couple of times. They were shooting this ethnic immigrant folk-dance troupe in front of Cooper Union one Saturday, which is where Jeannette met up with Igor. He was a real big mother, and gentle as a baby. Body beautiful, with big gold teeth. Just what Jeannette needed after a couple of cerebral types like Willie and me. You

laugh, but compared to Igor, we were practically Einstein and Voltaire. He was a great big simple good-natured Russian dancing bear, and he adored Jeannette.

'"It's temporary," she told me, "but it's nice. Maybe that's even why it's nice."

'She threw a big party when Zelda turned six. Every kid in West Beth, plus me, Willie, Igor, Helen Thorakis, and the rest of the crew from the immigrant film. Also Scott the Bird. He'd moved back east, too, and he was always great at a party. The party was out on the roof. Willie made the birthday cake. Igor tried to teach us all this Russian folk dance. It was clear enough you could see Jersey. Helen and I got to talking about sixteen-millimeter distribution. It turned out she wasn't such a ball-buster after all. She just had frizzy hair. Smart lady. I don't think I'd want to go out with her, but she was fine to talk to. I wish her well. Zelda was beautiful, as usual. Couldn't wait to start first grade,' Phil said.

'This is starting to sound like an epilogue,' I said. 'Kind of anticlimactic. Maybe we should end with the fight in Malibu.'

'What happens to real people is not anticlimactic,' Phil said. 'Besides, I have a great idea for the closing shot. It's a real long shot from a crane. Night. Willie and Phil walk away from the camera. Off into the future, which is really the present, as it were.'

'Hmmm,' I said. 'Not very dramatic.'

'Real life is not dramatic, kid. Nobody dies in this picture. Not even the bird. But it's a beautiful shot. An image.'

'Maybe so.'

'*Maybe* so?' Phil said. 'Tell me, just out of curiosity, how does Willie end his book?'

'He has you both trying to pick up girls in Washington Square Park.'

Phil laughed. 'That's great. Do we score?'

'No.'

'That's not very dramatic, either,' Phil pointed out. 'True, but not dramatic.'

'It's kind of funny.'

'I don't want to end funny. I see this as a serious picture about friendship.'

'Maybe I can see both.'

'Sure,' Phil said. 'Give it a try. As long as they walk away together at the end. I know where I can rent the crane.'

CHAPTER 45

WILLIE & PHIL
by William Kaufman

The park was a Sunday-morning circus. There were jugglers and gymnasts, magicians and mimes performing in the sunshine. Willie counted half a dozen guitar pickers, besides a three piece jazz group, a hammer dulcimer player, and an old man with an accordion. On one patch of lawn, a group of students was practicing Tai Chi, following the moves of the master. Joggers and cyclists clogged the paths. Phil was eating pizza. Willie had the *Times*.

Willie felt good about himself. He was playing the piano a lot and taking a couple of night classes at NYU. When school was out, his sixth-period class chipped in and bought him a case of Bud and the Classic Comic edition of *Hamlet*. Phil was feeling good about himself. One of his 'I Love New York' spots won the commercial equivalent of an Oscar. The City Council sent him a nice letter, and he was getting close enough to smell the emulsions of his first feature film. Saturday, the day before, they'd taken Zelda to the Bronx Zoo.

Both of them were out of love, and glad of it. Jeannette was still their beloved friend, but she no longer obsessed either one of them. For the first time in years, they were at something that closely resembled peace.

Phil took a bite of his pepperoni-mushroom pizza. 'What do you say we pick up a couple of sex fiends and take in a movie?' he said.

'Foreign or domestic?' Willie asked.

'As long as they're built.'

They scanned the circle for someone they wanted to pick up.

But one woman was too fat, one was too thin. One was too young and one too old. One was too straight, another looked too liberated. After a while it became clear to them both that they were just window-shopping. So they went to the movies instead, and saw *Harold and Maude* for the third time at the same theater where they first met, nine years before.

Willie met his second wife in a comparative-literature class at NYU. Phil's wife was the younger cousin of his sister-in-law's best friend.

Both of them were much too old, and much too wise to trust to chance again.

POSTSCRIPT

The film ends with Willie and Phil walking up the street, away from the camera, into the future, which is really the present. I've got to admit, it's a nice shot. It gave me goose bumps.

It was my idea to have Willie and Phil walk past the waiting line for *The Rocky Horror Show*, past all the teenyboppers in their harlequin/androgyne/ghoul getups, when they come out of the movie at the end. I figured it was a nice, subtle way to show how much time had passed, how much they'd changed. Willie and Phil don't get the *Rocky Horror* crowd at all. It's absolutely foreign to them. Someone *else's* youth. They look like grown-ups now. It's a nice bit, and it works. I like it.

It's the only thing in the finished film that's actually mine. I wrote a script, but Phil wasn't completely satisfied with it. He thought it showed a woman's touch too much. He paid me, and he thanked me, and he even introduced me to Helen Thorakis when she came out to the Coast recently. As it turns out, she's taken an option on *The Bee Tree*.

The writing credit on *Willie and Phil* reads 'William Kaufman'. After I was done with it, I gave Phil Willie's novel to read. He liked it a lot. So much that he decided to hire Willie to do the screenplay of his book, and that's what they shot.

I saw *Willie and Phil* in a theater the other night, and it's a good film. I still like my version better, but Willie did a good job, and Phil got himself a high-powered director and a fantastic cameraman, and the reviews have ranged from pretty good to euphoric. *Willie and Phil* should do well. I wish I had a piece of it.

What I couldn't help wondering, after the house lights came up the other night and I got up to leave, was what Jeannette was going to make of it.

Maybe someday I'll get to meet her and find out.

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